MARIETTA'S MARRIAGE

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MARIETTA'S MARRIAGE

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BY

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AUTHOR OF MATRIMONY, MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC,
A VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK, THE DANCER IN YELLOW, ETC.

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MARIETTA'S MARRIAGE.

CHAPTER I.

LORD MIDDLEWOOD'S CHILDREN.

"CONFOUND it all!" exclaimed the old gentleman in the corner of the smoking-carriage, "here they are slowing down again. Upon my word, it's too bad!"

His opposite neighbour agreed that it was; but remarked, by way of excuse for the railway company, that the gradients were uncommonly steep thereabouts. The train, indeed, was at that time skirting the high-lying Peak district of Derbyshire, and there were obvious difficulties about the maintenance of a uniform rate of speed. But the first speaker would admit no such plea.

"Gradients be hanged!" he returned, "we're slackening because they're going to stop us at Middlewood—for the third time during the present month, as I can personally testify. Now what I want to know, and what I shall make a point of writing to the traffic manager to ask, is whether the company has a legal right to delay passengers by express for a matter of ten minutes merely because some whipper-snapper or other has been invited to stay with Lord Middlewood? If so, well and good, and we shall know what to expect in future when we are charged express fares. If not——"

He glanced savagely at the third occupant of the carriage, a tall young man, whose travelling-bag, as he

may have noticed, bore on a label the printed name of Harold St. Quintin, beneath which was written the tell-tale address of Middlewood Hall. The culprit hastily raised the *Field* between him and his accuser to conceal his embarrassment, for he was a modest, unassuming youth, and nothing could have been further from his wish than to cause inconvenience to any old gentleman. It was no fault of his that Lord Middlewood had ordered the train to be stopped, nor could he be aware that Lord Middlewood did not care a straw (except, perhaps, at election times) how much inconvenience might be inflicted upon insignificant passengers by rail. What is the use in these days of being a mighty territorial magnate if you are to waive the few trifling privileges left to you by a triumphant democracy?

Presently the train was brought to a standstill, and Mr. St. Quintin, with a deprecating glance at his aggrieved fellow-travellers, hastened to collect his belongings, which a groom was waiting to receive. As he stepped out on to the platform, one of the aggrieved persons asked:

"Who is that long-legged fellow?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the other. "Some friend of young Mallet's, come down for shooting, I suppose. I only hope he'll report my remarks to his noble entertainer. I was glad to observe a blush of shame upon his ugly face."

Of an appropriate and not unbecoming blush Harold St. Quintin may have been guilty; but to call his face an ugly one was scarcely fair. It was a long, narrow face, divided vertically by a nose of noble dimensions, and horizontally by a mouth far too wide for beauty; but if these features sinned against the rules of art, they were redeemed in part by his well-opened gray eyes, and altogether by that indescribable expression of countenance which is the peculiar property of kindly, honest men. It was impossible to look at him and doubt that; if you should ever have occasion to ask him what

he thought of you, he would subject himself to deep mental suffering by telling you the unscrupulous truth.

Happily for him and for others, he could have said exactly what he thought about Lionel Mallet without hurting anybody's feelings; and what he thought was very much what all the world thought. Lionel Mallet, that spoilt child of fortune whom fortune had not succeeded in spoiling, had driven down to the station to meet him, and greeted him as warmly as one young Englishman ever greets another. This very handsome, broad-shouldered fellow, whose hair curled crisply over a well-shaped head, and whose profile had been pronounced almost perfect by more than one competent judge, was about to start in life with advantages far more substantial than those which are proverbially but skin deep. Heir-apparent to an ancient title, and actual proprietor of an estate which had been carefully managed for him during a long minority, he was believed to possess, into the bargain, more than an average share of brains, while he was known to excel in every form of sport and pastime. When to all this is added the fact that his conduct at Eton and Oxford had been irreproachable, or nearly so, it will be perceived that he had some reason for sharing the apprehensions of Polycrates. However, he was just now blessed with a grievance—not a very serious one, to be sure, still a genuine grievance, so far as it went—and upon this he proceeded to descant as soon as he and the friend who had been his most intimate associate at the University were seated side by side in his dogcart.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, old chap," said he, "and if I must needs explore foreign lands, I would rather do it in your company than in anybody else's; but I confess that it would suit me a good deal better to stay at home. It seems to me that one can find out all that there's any necessity to know about other countries with an atlas and a few books of reference."

"I suppose Lord Middlewood doesn't think so,"

observed St. Quintin. "But you are your own master, after all; you aren't bound to obey him or anybody."

"Ah, that's just where the shoe pinches! How is one to disobey one's natural master when he admits that, owing to the peculiar circumstances, he is compelled to ask favours instead of giving orders? My father is old-fashioned; he was sent on the grand tour when he was young, and he is persuaded that an extended edition of the grand tour is the necessary wind up of a liberal education. And then, naturally enough, he is in a mortal funk lest I should marry somebody before I have had time to look about me. Well, it's a bore; but it couldn't very well have been helped, and I dare say we shall manage to get some fun out of our wanderings."

"I expect to do so," remarked St. Quintin; "but I am rather easily pleased, and what you call a bore I call a downright godsend. To see India and Egypt and Italy free of expense is a piece of good luck which doesn't come twice in a lifetime to the likes of me!"

It was also a piece of good luck for a young man who had neither wealth nor powerful influence to have been selected as Lionel Mallet's companion on that journey. For Mallet, who would some day be Viscount Middlewood, and who was already marked out by position and inheritance to play a prominent part in political life, would, it might safely be assumed, be able ere long to render valuable services to his friends. But St. Quintin, dowered though he was with a sufficiency of sober sense and foresight, had not thought of that when he had accepted the offer conveyed to him by Lionel's father. It had been a question with him whether it would be wise on his part to interrupt his reading for the Bar in order to undertake the proposed trip: if he had consented, it was partly because he could not resist so great a temptation, partly because Lionel had wanted him so much to consent. It had always been his habit to do as far as possible what Lionel wanted him to do.

"What a beautiful, wild country this is!" he remarked, while the dogcart was driven at a round pace up hill and down dale in the yellow sunshine of the autumn afternoon.

"Well, yes, it's wild enough," his friend agreed; "I don't know whether you would call it beautiful if you saw it in the month of January, and we have no hounds hereabouts, except the jelly-dogs. Ludworth, my own place, which is on the borders of Cheshire, you know, is a good deal more favourably situated than this."

"For hunting, you mean?"

"Well, for everything, except grouse. The worst of it is that it's rather a big house for a lone man to inhabit, and, now that I have come into possession, my father will never go there again without a formal invitation. He's tremendously punctilious about that sort of thing."

It is perhaps as well to be a little punctilious with your only son when he happens to be independent of you in a pecuniary sense, and Lord Middlewood, who was a man of many experiences, may have thought that his best chance of retaining influence and authority under circumstances so difficult lay in a formal renunciation of the same. He may likewise have thought —and indeed he did—that Ludworth ought to have come to him, instead of to his heir; but he had never given utterance to an opinion which had apparently not been shared by the kinsman who had died many years before, bequeathing that very desirable property to a child of eight years old, with stringent directions as to the employment of surplus revenues during the child's minority. In accordance with the will of that deceased kinsman, Lionel had only come of age on the completion of his twenty-third year, and now that he had taken his degree, it was obviously desirable that he should see a little of the world before falling a victim to one of the Belgravian mammas whose arms were ready to clasp him. As a result of his good

nature, therefore, Harold St. Quintin and he were about to see something of the world in a geographical sense.

That small portion of the world in which his childhood had been spent was a district of rolling moors and uplands and grass fields, divided by stone walls. Deep valleys, through which trout streams ran, and of which the precipitous banks were clothed by hanging woods, intersected it; mountain-ashes, brilliant just now with clusters of scarlet berries, bordered the road, and presently a pair of massive iron gates were flung open to admit the dogcart into a well-timbered, undulating park.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mallet," said St. Quintin, in the grave, convinced accents of one who has hit upon an interesting discovery; "you're a devilish lucky chap!"

Lionel laughed—partly because it is not unpleasant to be a devilish lucky chap, partly because nobody with an average sense of humour could help laughing at dear old St. Quintin's remarks.

"Oh, I don't grumble," he replied. "All the same, if it comes to that, I'm not sure that Betty's luck isn't better than mine. No responsibilities, you see, and as much liberty as she chooses to claim—which is a good deal."

He pointed with his whip, as he spoke, at an approaching vehicle, the driver of which appeared to claim, amongst other things, the lion's share of the road. This was the Honourable Betty Mallet, Lionel's only sister, who was driving a pair of ponies tandem, and who, after forcing the occupants of the dogcart on to the grass, greeted them with a friendly nod. Miss Mallet was going to be a beauty and a considerable heiress. Many people thought that she was already the former, though she was still only a child, and her fair hair hung down her back in one thick plait. The frank blue eyes with which she took stock of her brother's companion while she passed, were destined, as anybody could foresee,

to make hearts ache, and she displayed a row of white, even teeth when Lionel called out:—

"Now then, Betty, where are you going to? And who gave you permission to drive your ponies one in front of the other, I should like to know?"

"Took it, dear boy," she replied over her shoulder. "Also the harness, which I'm sure you are happy to lend me. I'm going over to pay a duty call to granny, and ask her what she thinks of my turn out."

"You'll hear what she thinks in plain language if you ever get there!" shouted Lionel. "But you won't. The first waggon you meet will send you and your cart into the ditch without touching you."

To this gibe Miss Mallet, being out of earshot, made no rejoinder, and St. Quintin observed sententiously, "Your sister certainly does appear to be allowed a fair share of liberty."

Lionel shrugged his shoulders.

"She has a will of her own," he answered, "and she has never, within her memory, had a mother of her own. My grandmother comes down upon her like a cartload of bricks every now and then; but that doesn't trouble her much. She can do exactly what she likes with my father, and, in justice to her, I must say that she doesn't, as a rule, abuse her power. It's in a few years' time that she will be apt to give us all trouble, I'm afraid."

Nothing seemed more probable; so St. Quintin discreetly held his peace, thinking to himself that, upon the whole, he would just as soon not be the father of Lord Middlewood's children.

The gray-bearded man who, from the library window of the mansion which was now in sight, was watching the advent of the two young friends, would have told him, no doubt, that paternal cares and anxieties play the deuce with one's nervous system. Not that Lord Middlewood could fairly complain of the manner in which either his son or his daughter had so far treated him; but his nervous system did not happen to be a robust one, and, as has been mentioned, he did not pos-

sess that control over the purse-strings which confers ultimate power and authority upon the House of Commons. To have a son who is a richer man than you are yourself is to occupy an anomalous position, while Betty would, of course, have been an anomaly even if she had not had the certainty of inheriting the whole of her grandmother's property. Riches, like poverty, have their drawbacks, and Lord Middlewood, who had been hard up during the earlier years of his life, sometimes felt disposed to murmur at the conditions under which an old age of ease and prosperity had been granted to him. However, he had heard excellent reports of this young St. Quintin, who was distantly related to many noble families, and who, it might be hoped, would restrain Lionel at a critical period of life from making a fool of himself. And when the newcomer was conducted into the library to be introduced, he decidedly liked the look of him.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, sir," said he, in his courteous, old-fashioned way. "We have very little to offer you in the shape of amusement here, I am afraid; but you will be released at the end of a week, and in the meantime there will be the shooting for you—such as it is."

To himself—for, indeed, he was a sufficiently shrewd old fellow, who, as diplomatist, politician, and sportsman, had learned to judge men quickly in his day—he thought, "This is the right type—simple, not too stupid, and a gentleman. Probably armed with religious convictions of some sort. No great fear of cards, or French actresses, or Oriental orgies in his company, I should say. Looks as if he kept himself in tolerably hard physical condition too—which is important, in view of the fact that one wishes him to serve as an object lesson."

These rapid reflections were made while St. Quintin was expressing a very sincere admiration for the imposing edifice which had been erected at an enormous outlay by Lord Middlewood's grandfather. It was in

truth a very fine, if somewhat gloomy, example of the Palladian order of architecture, and, on account of its vast, stiff gardens and the art treasures which it contained, had always been considered one of the show places of England. Its present owner smiled, and remarked:—

"I doubt whether you would think so highly of Middlewood if you were condemned to live here. Nothing is more miserably uncomfortable than a house which has no small rooms. Besides, it has almost been the ruin of us, and that gives one a grudge against it. Lionel, who has a really charming house of his own, will be well advised if he sets fire to this gigantic white elephant on the day of my funeral."

"Perhaps my own obsequies may have been solemnised before then," said Lionel.

"My dear fellow, I am afflicted, or blessed, with at least three mortal diseases; I have the highest medical authority for saying so. That is one reason why I must beg Mr. St. Quintin to see that you do not go out tiger shooting on foot, or visit cholera-stricken regions. It is so clearly your duty to marry and beget an heir without unnecessary loss of time! As for me, I shall endeavour, in spite of the doctors, to hang on until you return from your travels. More than that I can scarcely be expected to undertake."

With his waxen pallor, his round shoulders, and the slow languor of his movements, Lord Middlewood did not look as if longevity could be expected of him by any reasonable man; but he had been more or less of an invalid for years past, and he was neither more nor less ill than usual now. His youth had been somewhat stormy, his mature age politically distinguished; in the evening of life he had withdrawn from public affairs, and had taken to watching his health—in the absence of anything else to watch, save the ways and manners of his singularly independent children. St. Quintin, who, though not quick, was observant, felt sorry for him, without quite knowing why.

Dinner was served two hours later at a small round table in an enormous dining-room, and as there were, for the moment, no other visitors in the house, Betty played hostess with an ease and aplomb which promised well for the future.

"It seems that you don't count," she remarked to her brother's friend. "As a general thing, when we have people staying with us I dine up stairs, because I am supposed to be still in the schoolroom. You might not think it to look at him, but my father is a rigid, unbending disciplinarian."

"I do my best to maintain discipline," Lord Middlewood said; "but the truth is that I am not allowed to be master in my own house, and any order that I may make so bold as to give is treated with calm contempt. Upon what conditions did I give you leave to drive those ponies, Betty?"

The girl laughed, showing those white little teeth which had already won St. Quintin's respectful admiration.

"Dear old man," she remonstrated, "why did you go fussing out to the stables, and asking questions? It was all right; I haven't a scratch upon me, nor have the ponies."

"You did upset the cart then?" returned her father. "I thought as much! I may say that I never fuss, and I haven't been to the stables all day; but you were pleased to drive tandem down the avenue under my very nose. I beg to intimate that you will not do such a thing again."

"I don't suppose I shall," said Betty, with a sigh. "Not yet awhile, anyhow; for I have had a little misfortune with the harness. Now, don't swear, Lionel; the repairs shall be executed at my own expense, and we didn't exactly turn over. Only I was obliged to put off my visit to granny, which I was sorry for."

Lionel looked as if he might be going to say something which the occasion would have justified; but

before he could open his lips his father struck in hastily with:—

"Oh, I'll pay for a new set of harness, upon the condition that it shall be put away somewhere where the sight of it won't act as a temptation. Which of us can always rise superior to temptation? Perhaps not even you, Lionel, if the evidence of your friend Mr. Strahan is to be believed. Suppose we change the subject."

The subject was accordingly changed, but the above speech, with its unexpected allusion, caused both the young men to redden slightly. One of them thought it a very odd and irrelevant thing to have said; the other, who knew his father's peculiarities, accepted it with good humour, though he did not altogether like it.

CHAPTER II.

ST. QUINTIN TAKES NOTES.

"THAT was quite characteristic of him," Lionel remarked to his friend later in the evening, when Lord Middlewood had dismissed the two young men to billiards and cigars. "He knows a lot and says precious little until the fancy takes him. He has never spoken a word to me about that miserable business, and I was in hopes that he hadn't heard of it. But he was afraid I was going to scold Betty, and he can't bear her to be scolded; so I suppose he thought that was as good a way as another of shutting me up."

"You had nothing to do with it; your name would not have been mentioned in connection with the affair if that fellow Strahan had not dragged it in to shield himself," said St. Quintin, scoring rather neatly off the red.

"Oh, well, I knew the poor girl, and I used to see a good deal of her, just as he and half a dozen others did. I'm sure he was very welcome to mention my name, and it seems to me that he was entitled to clear himself from false suspicions by doing so. He gave his evidence in a thoroughly straightforward manner, whereas Brydon thought it more prudent to disappear. Consequently, we now know pretty well which horse to saddle. One doesn't want to speak ill of the dead; but the fact, of course, is that poor Maggie Field was—what she was, and what has happened to Brydon might have happened to any of us."

"I don't know," answered St. Quintin deliberately, "what has happened to Brydon, who was a very great fool, I admit, to run away. I know what couldn't have happened to you or me. I'm not so sure that it couldn't have happened to Strahan."

"You mean that we couldn't have perjured ourselves, and that you believe he did? Isn't that rather unfair upon a man whom you dislike?"

St. Quintin, who had got the balls together, made a break of fifteen before replying, "I dare say I am unfair. Anyhow, he has marched off with flying colours; so nothing that I say or think can do him any harm. I don't deny that I dislike him."

"I should say that you are absolutely the only man of his acquaintance who does," remarked Lionel. "A better all-round fellow than Strahan never stepped, and I think you'll find, too, that he will make himself heard of in the world. I only wish I had half his brains, I know!"

"Oh, he's clever, no doubt."

"Yes; and it's a thousand pities that he should be dismissed to Australia to earn his living, when he might have had a brilliant career at home—though perhaps, all things considered, he is wise to go. Mind you, this scandal, out of which you say he has come with flying colours, hasn't done him any good. In such cases there are always plenty of people, like you, to shake

their heads and hint that the whole truth hasn't transpired."

The whole truth concerning a recent tragedy which had caused no little stir in Oxford and its neighbourhood certainly had not transpired; but when suspicion attaches to various persons, of whom one takes to his heels, without leaving any address behind him, the situation can scarcely be accounted bewildering. The unfortunate girl who had been found drowned in the river, and whose reasons for having sought death were only too clearly established, had been pronounced by a coroner's jury to have committed suicide while in an unsound state of mind. There had not been, nor could there have been, any suggestion of foul play; but several undergraduates had been summoned to give evidence, and one of them, Brydon by name, had failed to respond. From that circumstance conclusions had naturally been drawn which had exculpated Lionel's friend Strahan, who might otherwise have found himself in a somewhat awkward position.

"Well, I don't think your father should have said that about your yielding to temptation," resumed St. Quintin, after a pause. "If I were you I should tell him that——"

"Bless your soul!" interrupted Lionel, "he didn't mean anything; he knows as well as you do that I should never allow another man to be made a scapegoat for me. All he wanted was to stop me from hauling Betty over the coals and to give me a gentle reminder that he had his eye upon me. He'll always have his eye upon me, poor old fellow, and for a long time to come he'll be in terror lest he should see some unwelcome sight. I don't mind betting an even fiver that he asks you to write to him every now and then while we are away."

"I shall be very happy to write to him," St. Quintin declared; "for I know I shall have nothing to report which he ought not to be very happy to hear."

That sounded like a rather bold assertion to make

about anybody of Lionel Mallet's years and means; but in reality it was justified by experience. There are young men who, without being pious or priggish or visibly different from their compeers, may be trusted never to go wrong, and Lionel belonged to that select band. St. Quintin's admiration and affection for him rested primarily upon a conviction that he would under any conceivable circumstances behave like a gentleman, and secondarily upon a sense of personal obligation which was perhaps exaggerated. For St. Quintin, who was incurably modest, could not help feeling that he owed some gratitude to this brilliant and popular friend of his for consenting to be his friend. He was, however, Lionel's superior at billiards; so he won the game easily enough, and neither success nor the resultant half-crown was grudged to him. Lionel was too generous and too rich to grudge success or money to any man who had earned those desirable rewards.

The tables were turned on the following day, when the two young men went out shooting together, and when Lionel conclusively proved himself a far better shot than his guest. When they reached home at nightfall they found Lady Maria Halsted drinking tea all by herself in the library, and she greeted them with—

"Oh, here you are! Middlewood has gone off to write letters which he pretends are urgent, and I don't know what has become of Betty. But I said I should wait for you, because I wanted to see Mr. St. Quintin, whose father and grandfather I remember very well. Excellent men, both of them, and not more extravagant than we were in those days; but money came to us, whereas it didn't come to them. So here we are, while they—aren't anywhere."

"What—not even in the Kingdom of Heaven, which we can only hope to gain by passing through the eye of a needle?" asked Lionel. "It's well for you that your pet parsons can't hear you making such unorthodox statements, granny."

"I suit my conversation to my company," Lady Maria returned. "In this house only worldly language is understood, and from a worldly point of view the St. Quintins have ceased to exist. I am very sorry for it; though I am glad to recognize a survival of the family features upon the countenance of your friend. His people have always worn beaks, and always had worse luck than they deserved—such are the inscrutable decrees of Providence. Go away, Lionel, and change your wet boots while I talk to him."

St. Quintin had often heard of this bright-eyed little old lady, who was now a notorious and active supporter of the evangelical party, but whose past life had been largely concerned with the affairs of this present world. Her first husband, who had died without succeeding to the title, had been replaced by Mr. Halsted, a retired Manchester merchant of considerable fortune, who had not long survived him, and it was believed that the actual Lord Middlewood had been set upon his legs at a critical period by the timely assistance of the dowager. However that might be, money, as she said, had come to the Mallets; they had more than enough of it now, and of her own share a goodly portion was devoted to charity. Her ready benevolence had caused her name to be blessed by every undeserving writer of begging letters in the kingdom, her friends were as the sands of the sea-shore in number, and her indiscretions were a by-word amongst her near relatives. To how great an extent she was capable of being indiscreet was shown by the first thing that she said after her grandson had obediently left the room.

"Why this journey?" she inquired. "Middlewood is so absurdly reticent that it is useless to ask him the most natural questions; but I can't imagine that he would be so eager to pack Lionel off to the ends of the earth unless there had been a scrape of some sort."

"There has been no scrape at all that I know of," answered St. Quintin. "I suppose Lord Middlewood

thinks that his son had better travel a little before settling down."

Lady Maria looked rather disappointed. "There was a poor girl who drowned herself at Oxford and with whom Lionel seems to have been intimate," she remarked. "I read all about it in the papers. But perhaps you wouldn't call that a scrape?"

"Nobody could," St. Quintin declared. "He had no more to do with the unhappy girl's misfortunes than I had."

"And one can see with half an eye that you would never have anything to do with the misfortunes of any girl. That is why you have been placed in charge of the hope of the family, I presume; and I don't for a moment doubt the wisdom of the choice. All the same, I prefer to hear of a scrape or two at starting in the case of young fellows situated as Lionel is. It stands to reason, you see, that they must make fools of themselves in *some* way, and if they don't do so in the ordinary way, they may break one's heart by marrying beneath them or becoming red-hot Radicals."

St. Quintin said he had no reason to suppose that Lionel was in danger of such aberrations from the clear path of duty.

"Ah, well!" sighed the old lady, "one never knows. He has some queer blood in his veins, and the Mallets are an obstinate race. Middlewood gave me a great deal of anxiety at one time; but fortunately it was impossible to interfere with him. So he had his fling, and turned out a perfectly respectable person, as you know. My opinion is that every man—or at least every man of that sort; I don't speak of good, quiet creatures like you—ought to have his fling. It's much the safest plan."

Then she recollected herself and hastened to add: "Of course I am only reasoning as Middlewood, who is a man of the world, poor fellow, might be expected to reason. Personally, I have long since realised the vanity of human greatness and the decitfulness of

riches; if my own wishes and prayers could be granted, my grandson would become another Lord Shaftesbury. But I am afraid that they are not at all likely to be granted."

"Well, not very," agreed St. Quintin. "The type is a rather antiquated one, don't you think so?"

Lady Maria chuckled; the young man's meditatively serious air amused her. "That," she replied, "is what I always say to Mr. Grace—Mr. Grace is our vicar, I should tell you, and a most earnest, admirable man. I always say to him that we can't raise the necessary funds for prosecuting Ritualists because we are out of the fashion. It is such a fatal mistake to be out of the fashion!—speaking, I mean, from a merely mundane point of view. Not that it makes any real difference."

"What makes no difference?" inquired St. Quintin, somewhat bewildered.

"Well, this or that school of religious opinion. A man must first be regenerate."

"But you said just now that he ought to start by having his fling."

Lady Maria laughed again. "Did I really? It was a shocking speech for a Christian woman to make, and I beg that you won't repeat it, Mr. St. Quintin. What I must have intended to say was that some methods of indulging in a fling are infinitely more disastrous than others, and that if Lionel does not break out in some direction, he will be very unlike his father and his grandfather—not to mention his sister, who is the most headstrong little dev—who is a difficult child to manage. I shouldn't wonder if you were to find Lionel rather difficult to manage."

"But I don't undertake to manage him," St. Quintin protested. "How can I?"

"You will be expected to do it, all the same. That is, you will be expected to bring him back safe and sound, and you will not be forgiven if you fail. Therefore, if you will be advised by me, you will exercise a careful supervision over his associates in foreign parts.

I speak in your interest; for your career, as you must be aware, will probably depend upon Middlewood's goodwill. He is out of politics, it is true; but he has influence, and there are still snug appointments which are open to young barristers who are influentially backed. In short, it would never do for you to let Lionel engage himself to some wandering widow—a thing which has been known to happen on a voyage before now, I believe."

The reappearance of the subject of her solicitude prevented her from expatiating further upon the perils which might possibly lie before him. Presently she was driven away in her heavy yellow barouche behind her fat horses—a quaint little figure. Lady Maria wore bonnets which must have been specially manufactured for her, since nobody else has worn bonnets of that shape during the past half century or more; her gray hair was arranged in the style commemorated by early portraits of the Sovereign of these realms. Why she affected black silk gloves it is impossible to say; they may have been symbolic of piety and humility. The general effect, at any rate, which she produced, as she sat upright in her carriage, was that of a very great lady, and in all probability her humble piety was compatible with a desire to achieve some such effect.

Miss Mallet, who emerged from an adjacent place of concealment immediately after her grandmother's departure, wanted to know how many calumnious assertions had been made respecting her in the course of an interview which she had been careful not to interrupt.

"To the best of my belief, your name wasn't so much as mentioned," replied her brother. "You aren't important yet, Betty; your time will come when you are a little older. For the present I obscure all lesser lights, and it was necessary to turn me out of the room in order that St. Quintin might be entreated to drynurse me with care. You can see by his guilty looks that he has been promising to do his very best."

"I promised nothing," St. Quintin declared; "I refused all responsibility."

"But you can't escape it, my dear fellow; I am sure granny must have pointed that out to you. What a lucky thing it is for you that my sobriety is only equalled by my common sense! Gambling doesn't attract me, I have never been drunk, or wished to get drunk, in my life, and a more unimpressionable being doesn't exist. So you and granny may sleep on both ears, as the French say."

He walked away across the thickly carpeted entrance-hall, remarking that he must write a few more letters before the post went out; whereupon Betty said abruptly: "Come and see the dogs, will you?"

St. Quintin put on his cap and accompanied her to the kennels hard by, where about a dozen terriers of various breeds, English, Scotch, and Irish, were exhibited to him by their mistress. He knew something about their points, and subjected them to a more or less intelligent criticism; but he soon discovered that his companion, who had been the winner of many prizes, was a good deal better informed than he. She had been fairly successful at shows, she told him, but there was very little use in going in for breeding unless you could do it upon a larger scale.

"Some day, when I have a house of my own, I shall build proper kennels, and give myself up to dogs more than I can here."

"I should think," said the matter-of-fact St. Quintin, "that that would have to depend a good deal upon whether your husband happens to be a lover of dogs or not."

"Oh, it isn't at all certain that I shall have a husband; I think, upon the whole, I should be more comfortable without one. Anyhow, the house will be mine; for I believe it is understood that when granny dies—which I hope won't be for a great many years yet—Chelton is to come to me."

"You are certain to marry," said St. Quintin, in a

tone of voice which implied that he rather deplored Miss Mallet's inevitable fate.

The queerest notions will find their way somehow into the best regulated minds, and this young man, whose mind was eminently sane and sensible, surprised himself in the act of envying the unknown person who was destined to share Miss Betty's brilliant prospects. She was so very pretty; she looked so highly bred, with her short nose, her clear blue eyes, and her perfectly shaped lips; and there was, besides, an indefinable something about her. But of course she was a mere child, while the involuntary dreamer was a grown man, ever so much older than she, and ever so far beneath her in social standing. He made haste to answer her quick rejoinder of "Why?"

"Because hundreds of people will want to marry you," he said, "and because it will be a most extraordinary thing if you don't want to marry one of them. I only hope you won't choose the wrong one!"

"I shall choose the most impecunious one, if choose I must," Betty returned. "There will be the risk of his being a fortune-hunter; but, to set against that, there will be the certainty that he must come to me for his pocket-money. However, I dare say the wisest plan will be to remain single and breed terriers. It isn't all roses to be an heiress."

Indeed it is not; and the philosophic St. Quintin, while inspecting the horses in the stables, whither he was next conducted, said to himself that a healthy young man who has his fortune yet to make is in some respects better off than persons whose fortunes are already made. These Mallets, with their wealth and their estates—of which they appeared to have one apiece—were scarcely, if at all, happier than their neighbours; it was easy to see that they were conscious of and oppressed by the inexorable law which decrees that the rich of this world, even less than the poor, shall be free.

"All the same, I am determined to have as good a time as I can," said Betty, startling him by her sudden

retort to meditations which had not been translated into words. "I shall insist upon that."

St. Quintin was not a lady's man; it did not occur to him to reply that anything which Miss Mallet might be pleased to insist upon she would assuredly obtain. But he glanced at the girl's bright young face and said, quite simply and honestly, "Well, I hope you will have a good time. After all, I don't know why you shouldn't."

"The only thing is that I am rather solitary. I wish you weren't going away so soon; I have a notion that we should be friends, you and I. You don't pretend to know more about terriers than you really do know, and though you didn't mention the bay horse's straight shoulder, I could see that you noticed it. However, you will come back, perhaps, when you and Lionel have finished your globe-trotting."

"If I am invited," answered the young man, smiling.

"Oh, you'll be invited. I send out almost all the invitations nowadays, and as I haven't a single friend amongst our innumerable acquaintances, I shall not be likely to forget you. Now, we'll have a look at the poultry-yard, if you are not in a hurry."

"I don't wonder," observed St. Quintin to Lionel that evening, "at Lord Middlewood's being a slave to your sister; I am sure that if I were her father I should be her slave."

Lionel laughed. "She has always been a masterful brat," said he; "but she is growing up at a deuce of a pace. She will soon have slaves of another kind at her feet."

"Some Duke or other, I suppose?"

"Oh, not necessarily a Duke; granny is capable of marrying her to any Evangelical nobleman, and she will have to come out under granny's wing, I take it."

"But she will be bestowed upon some personage of high degree?"

"Well—naturally. Will you give me my revenge at billiards before we go to bed?"

CHAPTER III.

PONTE A SERRAGLIO.

"HÉ, Marietta!—ohé!"

The cry, with a prolonged accent upon the last syllable, rang up the wooded valley, and reached the ears of the girl beneath the Spanish chestnut tree, who responded in a clear contralto voice, "*Ecco!*"

She was a marvellously beautiful girl, eighteen years of age or thereabouts. Eyes of so soft and velvety a brown as hers, a complexion of such exquisite, healthy pallor, hair of such dusky luxuriance, belonged, as might be seen at a glance, to the favoured land where she was seated on that fine May afternoon. Yet she was only half an Italian, her father, who was shouting to her from the depths of the ravine above which she had taken up her station, being an Englishman by birth.

Presently he came in sight, panting a little from the labour of the ascent; for, despite his square shoulders, his well-set-up figure, and his spruce, military carriage, Colonel Vigne was no longer as active as he had been when he had fought in the Austrian ranks as a stripling at the battle of Novara. He had been a handsome fellow in those far-away days; he was a handsome old gentleman still—his white moustache carefully waxed, the rest of his face not less carefully shaved, his frayed linen spotless, and his threadbare clothes fitting him to perfection. Few observers would have taken him for an Englishman; travelled observers would have recognised at once in his bearing the unmistakable mark of the *Kaiserlich-Königlich*

service; one or two might have fancied that they could detect in him certain warning characteristics of the cosmopolitan adventurer. But these clever and discerning persons would have been mistaken; for he was only an adventurer in so far as that he had had a fair share of adventures, and no more of a cosmopolitan than a man who has renounced his nationality is compelled to be. The episode which had preceded his marriage with an Italian lady of high family and very small fortune had, to be sure, partaken of an adventurous and romantic character; but even in the half-forgotten era of the hated *Tedesco* rule he had passed for a gallant man, and had escaped assassination by the readiness which he had ever displayed to exchange shots with aggrieved persons. But all that was very ancient history; his fighting career was over and done with; he had been for many years a widower, and if he was now once more in Italy, that was only because he had no particular reason for being anywhere else, and because his daughter, who had been educated in a Tuscan convent, was after a fashion at home there. And it was in the Italian language, which he spoke quite fluently, that this elderly, jovial-looking warrior called out—

"I have been seeking you high and low. What have you been doing with yourself all these hours?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders and held up an open volume, which, to tell the truth, she had not been reading. "I thought it would be fresher up here than in that stifling little hotel," she answered discontentedly; "but there is no fresh air to be had in this neighbourhood, and there is nothing to do, nothing to see. Oh, why do people come to the Bagni di Lucca?"

"They do not," said the Colonel, taking off his straw hat and mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief. He was bald, but his baldness was partially concealed by long streaks of grey hair, which were trained over his head from a parting just above his left ear. "It is a very long time ago that the Baths of Lucca ceased to be fashionable. Nowadays people go to

Switzerland, to the Tyrol, who knows where? That is why one lives so cheaply at Ponte a Serraglio, and that is why you and I are here, *fanciulla mia.* I have been talking to those two young Englishmen who arrived last night; I have been trying to persuade them to stay a week and make excursions. They are pleasant young men; I enjoyed talking to them. They reminded me—ah! *Dio mio!*—they reminded me of people and things about which you know nothing at all."

The girl turned, with perceptibly quickened interest, towards her father, who had seated himself upon the ground beside her.

"Who are they?" she asked. "Did you discover their names? Are they lords? The good-looking one seemed to me to have an aristocratic air."

"He has not stolen it," Colonel Vigne replied; "it belongs to him by right of inheritance. He is the only son of Lord Middlewood; I remember reading in an English paper some time ago that he has an independent fortune, in addition to being his father's son. He and his friend have been spending the winter in India and Egypt. They were at Rome for Easter, and now they are on their way home. But they do not want to hurry, he says, because he dislikes the idea of a long London season. Perhaps he means that he dislikes the idea of marrying, and that his people are in a hurry to get him married."

"How fortunate he is!—oh, how fortunate!" murmured Marietta pensively.

This ejaculation was made in English—for, indeed, Marietta Vigne was equally at home in three, if not four, languages—and in the same tongue her father responded philosophically—

"Well, I don't know so much about that. It is pleasant to be rich, but it is pleasanter still to have your own way; and a man so wealthy and important as Mr. Mallet can by no means be permitted to take his own way. Upon my honour, I do not envy him.

Such as I am, I find myself very well satisfied, with my half-pay and my small savings—and my daughter."

He stretched out his brown hand to clasp the slim, white one which lay listlessly upon Marietta's lap, and received from her fingers the somewhat perfunctory pressure which she had learnt to accord in answer to such caressing invitations. Her father, it seemed, was fond of her; though it was but recently that she had become his permanent companion. She also was fond of him; but she really did not feel able to share his satisfaction with the wandering, Bohemian life which they were apparently destined to lead. To be beautiful, to be accomplished, to be fully conscious of advantages which have always commanded the world's admiration, and to be condemned to the society of second-rate hotels and *pensions*—no, that is not the fate which any girl of eighteen can be expected to accept with philosophic resignation.

"Yet we have also titled relations—whom we never see," she sighed irrelevantly. "I dare say our blood is as good as this Mr. Mallet's."

The Colonel's good-humoured countenance clouded over. "My father was an officer in the British army; my grandfather was a London physician," he said; "we have always belonged to what are known in England as the professional classes. With your poor, dear mother's family I have never been upon speaking terms. They regarded her marriage as a *mésalliance*—not to say an act of treachery to her country; for at that time patriotic feeling in Italy ran very high, and no Italian lady was permitted to look at a white uniform. Changes have taken place, it is true; but we shall never be forgiven; and why should we wish to be? These Duchesses and Princesses, who live with difficulty in corners of their great, gloomy palaces, are neither happy themselves, nor could they make you happy, Marietta *mia*. I could wish that you had never even heard of them. Do we not suffice to one another, you and I?"

The girl smiled upon him, but did not reply. She

was glad to think that she sufficed to this kindly, elderly gentleman, whose duties had kept him apart from her during nearly the whole of her adolescence, and whose undisguised pride in her beauty and talents was welcome enough to her; but his life was ending, whereas hers was beginning; it was impossible to pretend that she had no vision, no dream, no ambition beyond that of brightening his declining years. Other girls, who had been educated with her, were about to be presented at Court, introduced to fashionable society, married eventually to noblemen; while she—admittedly their superior at all points—was to be relegated to dull, *bourgeois* obscurity. Was it surprising that she should envy them, or that she should have a sense of being somewhat hardly used? Granddaughter of a mere London doctor? Yes; but granddaughter also of no less a personage than the late Prince Magliacci. Was it not absurd to treat such lineage as a matter of no importance?

Whether absurdly or not, it was thus that Colonel Vigne seemed bent upon treating the fact of his connection by marriage with the Magliacci family. Perhaps he was proud, perhaps he was genuinely indifferent; in any case, he did not like his daughter to allude to her maternal relatives, and was wont, whenever she did so, to change the subject as speedily as might be.

"These young Englishmen," he resumed presently, after he had made himself comfortable, with his head in the shade and his feet in the sun, and had lighted a long black cigar, "are agreeable, intelligent fellows. They are fond of music, they say; they were delighted with the opera at Naples. After dinner this evening you shall sing for them, Marietta. I think they will be astonished."

He laughed and rubbed his hands, in anticipation of the treat which awaited the strangers; but he had no ulterior motive for indulging in that innocent gesture of glee. At once a man of the world and a simple creature, Colonel Vigne knew very well that the future

Lord Middlewood must be an impossible candidate for his daughter's hand; and for the rest—he was a father, not a mother. Some day or other his only child would, no doubt, marry; but he was not personally eager to precipitate that event. He was happy in the present, with its irresponsible leisure and its charming physical environment; cares for the future did not as yet oppress him.

A few hours later he seated himself at the head of the *table d'hôte* table in the well-nigh deserted hotel at Ponte a Serraglio, Marietta being placed on his left hand, while Lionel Mallet occupied the chair on his right, and such was his unaffected geniality that the newly arrived travellers were soon upon terms approaching intimacy with him and his daughter.

"We will show you this country," the Colonel amiably promised. "Hitherto we have made no expeditions, because the weather has been so hot and we have been so lazy; but there are plenty of excursions to be made, and, now that we have an inducement, we will exert ourselves. It is a lovely neighbourhood."

"Marvellously so," Lionel Mallet agreed, with his eyes fixed upon the immediate neighbourhood of his interlocutor, which, to be sure, provided a spectacle lovely enough to gratify the most fastidious taste. "I am very glad that we thought of coming here," he added. Marietta smiled at him over the big black fan which she was manipulating. She had been nurtured in a convent; but *bon chien chasse de race*, and this handsome young Englishman's eyes had spoken to her in a language which her sex enabled her to interpret without the slightest difficulty.

"It is we who are glad," she said; "we were simply perishing for lack of something to talk to."

Her English, though easy and fluent, had a suspicion of foreign accent which lent attractiveness to it; she was neither shy nor self-conscious; she had put on her newest and most becoming frock. No wonder that the grave and observant St. Quintin, glancing from her

to the friend whom he was in honour bound to restore to Derbyshire intact, hoisted a mental danger-signal. So far, Lionel had given him no cause at all for uneasiness. Their somewhat hasty journey through India had resolved itself practically into a sporting tour; at Cairo they had been entertained chiefly by official personages, who had bored them both, while in Rome they had preferred to be simple tourists and mislay letters of introduction. But this semi-Italian, semi-English young lady, at whom Lionel was gazing with such obvious appreciation of her beauty, looked rather alarming. It would be well to avoid excursions in her company, St. Quintin thought, and to push on towards Milan and the lakes, according to programme. But, unfortunately, the revision or the carrying out of prearranged programmes did not depend upon him; nor, after he had heard Marietta sing, did he require to be told that his travelling companion would insist upon modifications. For Lionel had a more or less cultivated musical ear, while Marietta Vigne was gifted with one of those contralto voices which half-a-dozen women, on an average, are so fortunate as to possess in the course of each century.

She might—so she had been assured by persons qualified to speak authoritatively—make her fortune upon the operatic stage; she had often thought of the stage, in default of the realisation of other ambitions; such mild triumphs as she had already secured had been sweet to her, and she complied willingly with her father's suggestion when the party adjourned after dinner to the small public *salon*, where there was a wheezy piano.

The few remaining sojourners in the hotel, two English old maids, an unkempt German professor and others, drew near to listen to a performance which had not been undertaken for their benefit; a polyglot murmur of respectful admiration saluted the performer, as she arose from her music-stool and walked across the room to the open French window; it was only

natural and what might have been expected that Lionel Mallet, not content to associate himself with the general applause, should follow her. Presently the pair strolled out into the balmy night, in search of fireflies or moonlight effects, leaving the Colonel to light his cigar and St. Quintin to say, with an emphasis which was scarcely courteous:

"It is awfully kind of you to talk of showing us the country hereabouts; but I'm afraid we ought to be off. Our time is getting short."

"Oh, don't be in a hurry—don't be in a hurry," returned the old gentleman good-humouredly. "For young fellows like you time can't be short; though you will find holiday times grow shorter and shorter as you grow older. Grant us a poor week out of your superfluity, and I am sure you will never regret it. Not that I can pretend to be an altogether disinterested suppliant. The fact is that I want to give my daughter any little amusement I can, and it isn't every day that I am able to lay my hand upon suitable companions of her own age for her."

Well, that was candid, to say the least of it. St. Quintin judged it appropriate to remark in dubious accents, "Suitable?"

Colonel Vigne removed his cigar from his mouth. The lamplight, streaming through the open window, fell upon the low chair in which he was seated and illumined an honest countenance which wore a slightly pained expression.

"Suitable in respect of years and of your being both gentlemen, I meant," he explained gravely. "Of course I am well aware of the great social difference between your friend and my daughter, which constitutes, if I may so, her protection. But for that, I should have to be more careful; for you will easily understand that extra precautions are necessary in the case of a motherless girl who has only an old man to look after her."

St. Quintin drew back into the darkness to conceal

his blushes. "I—I beg your pardon," he stammered penitently; "I am always saying stupid things!"

But it was not, after all, so very stupid to scent possible cause for disquietude in the prolonged absence of Lionel and the lovely Marietta, nor did it exactly follow that because the one was of too high rank to offer marriage to the other, both might claim exemption from the accidents to which frail human nature is liable. Colonel Vigne, oddly enough, seemed to think that it did. He chatted agreeably and without any outward show of uneasiness for the next half-hour, and when his daughter reappeared, escorted by a young man who chanced to be carrying her fan for her, he had no complaint to make, except that he had been kept a long time waiting for the Tyrolese ballads, which he preferred to more ambitious vocal compositions.

So Marietta returned to the piano and sang "Madele, ruck, ruck, ruck," followed by other ditties of a like simple character, until it was pronounced by paternal authority to be high time for her to say good-night to the company.

"Well, as I said before," remarked Lionel, when he was left alone with his friend, "I'm uncommonly glad we thought of coming here."

"H'm! I don't know that I am," returned St. Quintin bluntly. "Oh, I quite agree with every word that you are going to say about the girl. She is splendidly handsome, and she sings like an angel, and all the rest of it. That is just why I should like to get back to Lucca in time to catch the train for Milan to-morrow, if you don't mind."

"My dear fellow, don't be such an ass! You know very well—or you ought to know—that I am not the sort of man to fall in love with a chance acquaintance, about whose antecedents I know nothing. At least, I do know something about them, because she has been telling me; and very interesting it was. But I assure you that I no more intend to make love to her than I intend to leave this to-morrow. We'll stay a week, and

subtract a few days, if we must, from those hackneyed Italian lakes. Don't shake your head, old man, I have made up my mind."

What is to be done with a man who has made up his mind and who is his own master? St. Quintin could think of nothing else to do but to continue shaking his head.

CHAPTER IV.

ADMIRATION AND DISCRETION.

"And what do you think of my young Englishmen?" Colonel Vigne inquired of his daughter, whom he had conducted as far as her bedroom door.

Marietta shrugged her shoulders. "I do not know them yet," she answered. "The one who was talking to you seemed to me to be rather proud and stupid. He looked at me as if he distrusted me, and after I had done singing I heard him whistle one of my songs nearly a semitone flat under his breath. He did not please me; I am sure he fancies himself very superior to us."

"Oh, he is an honest, modest fellow; he means no harm," the Colonel declared, laughing. "But what about the other?—what about the one who was talking to *you*, my dear?"

"He is handsome," was Marietta's verdict, delivered after a long pause for consideration.

"Is that all?"

"Surely that is a good deal when it is added to every other advantage that the heart of man can desire! But it is not all. I found him also—sympathetic."

"Marietta *mia*," said her father gravely, "you must beware of finding him too much so. Now, this is a warning for which I do not believe that there is any necessity, and in a few days' time we shall have seen

the last that we are ever likely to see of Mr. Mallet. But girls are apt to take romantic fancies into their heads, and you have no mother to put you on your guard against perils; so, to set myself at ease with my conscience, I ought to speak just one word. I ought to tell you that Mr. Mallet, though it is true that he has as yet no title of nobility, will some day be the head of a family which could never dream of allying itself with us."

Given the character and temperament of the person to whom it was addressed, the above caution could hardly have been worded in more unfortunate terms; but Colonel Vigne, who was but imperfectly acquainted with his daughter's character and temperament, deemed her reply quite reassuring.

"Do not be alarmed," she answered, smiling. "Mr. Mallet is handsome and sympathetic; but he does not strike me as irresistible. Besides, he himself told me just now that he would be obliged before long to marry some great lady whom his family would select for him. Perhaps he thought, as you do, that it was only fair to nip any ambitious visions of mine in the bud."

It cannot be pretended on Lionel Mallet's behalf that he had been actuated by motives at once so kindly and so fatuous; but it is a fact that he had made the statement alluded to in the course of his moonlight walk with Marietta; nor had he been denied the commiseration which he had appeared to solicit in response thereto. When two young people stroll out together by moonlight, it is not about the moon or the beauty of the mysterious landscape that they are wont to discourse. There is one subject which never fails to interest us all, young or old, and as Lionel Mallet and Marietta Vigne happened, for the time being, to be interested in one another as well as in themselves, they had not been bored. If the gentleman had been rather more communicative than the lady, that was because the latter had, or professed to have, next to nothing to communicate. Her life, with occasional breaks, had been spent

in a convent; with the outside world she was acquainted only by hearsay and through the medium of such works of fiction as she had been permitted to study; she had been brought up in the creed that a woman's duties are far more important than her pleasures, and that the duty of the vast majority of women is to become the mother of some judiciously selected man's children. But the seed of this admirable teaching had not fallen upon very favourable soil. Thought is free, even within the four walls of a convent; natural tendencies and aspirations are not to be excluded from the heart of man or woman in which they originate; and Marietta, who knew that she was well qualified to conquer the applause of her fellow-creatures, secretly coveted that applause above all things. For cherishing such an ambition a girl of her great beauty and with her wonderful singing voice could not in justice be blamed. The admiration of the race to which we belong may not be worth much; but it is scarcely at the age of eighteen that one can be expected to have arrived at that rather melancholy conclusion; nor, indeed, is it certain that the conclusion is not a false one. So Marietta had a little bit of a grievance, and she had listened with pleasure to Mr. Mallet's earnest declaration that her father ought to take her to London. She was inclined to agree with him that English people should not be permanently domiciled abroad, while the somewhat imprudent promises to which he had seen fit to commit himself respecting the reception which awaited her in the capital of her native land had set her heart beating.

It is quite out of the question to fall asleep so long as the heart remains in a state of abnormal activity. Marietta, therefore, lay awake for a long time, and indulged in waking dreams of an agreeable character. She saw herself singing to a great, fashionable audience in the concert-room of some London palace; she saw Lord Middlewood (who doubtless possessed such a palace) presenting her to princes and princesses; she saw the society of England at her feet. But although

her heart and her imagination played these strange pranks with her, neither was affected after the fashion against which she had been cautioned. She did not dream of marrying Mr. Mallet; she longed to be admired by everybody, not to be adored by a single individual; the admiration of the single individual, which she was conscious of having secured, was valuable to her solely as a means towards an end.

"Is it necessary to be noble in order to be admitted into London society?" she inquired, on the following day, of the gentleman upon whose kindly aid she already counted.

"Not in the least," answered Lionel, smiling; "there are people who would tell you that it is a surer passport to be a little ignoble. But the truth is that there is no such thing as London society nowadays; it is a huge, unwieldy mob, which does not even pretend to be exclusive. You have only to be rich enough——"

"But we are ridiculously poor," interrupted the girl.

"Well, that would prevent you from playing a very prominent part in the show; but it need not prevent you from looking on at it, which, I suppose, is what you wish for."

"After all," said Marietta meditatively, "I am not sure that I would not rather be a *prima donna*. But I am afraid my father would never consent to my going upon the stage."

"Oh, I should hope not! I don't think that would do at all," Lionel hastened to reply.

But on being asked why it would not do, he was unable to bring forward very convincing reasons. He could hardly say "Because you are much too beautiful;" so he took refuge in generalities which, by common consent, have long ago been pronounced out of date. Inexperienced and unsophisticated though she was, it was in her power to instance various tragedians, comedians, and vocalists whom the aristocracy of Europe had delighted to honour. "And, according to

you," she added, "there are more methods than one of obtaining admission into the best London houses."

"It is unnecessary to force an open door," returned Lionel, who flattered himself that he possessed a latch-key and wished her to understand that it would be entirely at her service. "Get your father to bring you to London and I will answer for the rest."

This decidedly rash undertaking was entered into upon the Prato Florito, a grassy slope of the mountain-side, whither the excursionists from Ponte a Serraglio had ascended. They had partaken of luncheon on that breezy height, which dominates the chestnut woods and the Bagni Caldi. St. Quintin had reluctantly accepted a cigar, and a suggestion from Colonel Vigne that they should stroll gently onwards and upwards. The scene, the weather, the hour, and the solitude were alike conducive to the utterance of rash speeches. However, Lionel abstained from further indiscretions, for he was really a cool-headed person, as well as a strictly honourable one, and he would have deemed himself greatly to blame had he seriously attempted to make love to a girl who did not, and never could, belong to his world.

Their colloquy on this occasion lasted for twenty minutes or so, by the expiration of which time Mr. Mallet's head was a shade less cool than it had been at the outset. Discretion is all very well, but a too conspicuous display of that quality has never yet won the approval of a sex which instinctively prefers audacity; and Marietta only obeyed the irresistible behests of feminine nature when she essayed, by means of demure hints and glances, to shake her companion's self-control a little. That task came as easily to her as it does to the rest of her sisters in arms. If, before sunset, she had not actually made him fall in love with her, she had brought him to the point of wishing with all his heart that he could allow himself to do so—which was pretty well for one afternoon's work.

And on the next day, and the next, and the day after that, a struggle which neither combatant acknowledged

to be such was renewed. All things considered, the result could not be doubtful, although matters might have ended differently had the stimulus of opposition been withheld from two people who were not, after all, precisely made for one another. But St. Quintin deemed it his duty to lecture the one, while Colonel Vigne had occasional indirect admonitions to address to the other; so they took their respective bits between their respective teeth. Now, we all know that when a horse behaves in that way there is not the slightest use in tugging at his mouth. To keep his head straight may not be impossible; but he must perforce be allowed to go on until he is tired, and there is always the chance of his tiring before a catastrophe occurs. In other words, Lionel and Marietta could not be prevented from wandering off together into bosky glades and secluded nooks. St. Quintin (after having been once or twice roundly snubbed) could do no more than remind his friend of the swift passage of time, observe that a great batch of correspondence must be awaiting their arrival at Milan, and point out, at the end of a week, that the expeditions offered by a charming locality had now been completely exhausted.

"All but one," answered Lionel. "We haven't done the Bargilio yet, and we're going to do it to-morrow. On the day after——" He paused, taking his under lip between his finger and thumb, and gazing pensively at the prospect from the window of the hotel by which they were standing.

"On the day after, I hope and trust, we shall take ourselves off."

"Well, yes; I suppose we had better. It is about time."

"I think it is," returned St. Quintin drily. "Glad you agree with me."

He was glad, at any rate, that the hour of their departure might now be regarded as decided upon, and he hastened to impart the news to Colonel Vigne, who replied composedly:

"So I hear from my daughter. I wish you could have remained a little longer; but we must not be ungrateful. We have to thank you both for some very pleasant days, and I dare say we shall add one to their number by this scramble up a steep mountain. It is a long climb, though. I am afraid I shall have to condescend to a donkey."

The climb to the ruined watch-tower in question, which sands upon a lofty peak whence the entire duchy of Lucca and the distant Mediterranean can be surveyed, proved indeed to be a long, hot and fatiguing one; but the Colonel's litle donkey was equal to the ascent. As for Marietta, who was similarly mounted, a certain pedestrain, plodding patiently in the rear, said to himself with grim jocularity that she was well provided for, since she had a spare ass at her elbow. That, however, was by no means the view which the young lady took of her neighbour, whom, as it chanced, she was just then complimenting upon his wisdom and strength of purpose.

"I am sure you are quite right to hurry home," she was saying; "it would be such a pity to make your father anxious about you."

"I am not hurrying, and I don't think my father will be at all anxious," Lionel answered in a slightly vexed tone; "but I have engagements in England which I must keep, if I can." After a pause he asked, "Have you said anything to your father about coming to London?"

"Yes," replied the girl; "but, as I expected, he does not think we shall be able to manage it this year. Indeed, it is very unlikely that we shall ever be able to manage it. Some day, perhaps, I may see London; but if I do, it will be as a public singer, whom I suppose you will not care to recognise."

"Do I deserve that sneer?" asked the young man with a reproachful glance.

Marietta smiled. "It is not a sneer; you have told me again and again that ladies and gentlemen do not recognise public singers in England."

"I never said anything so absurd!" Lionel protested.

But he had in truth, during previous conversations, dwelt with some earnestness upon the equivocal social position occupied by the class to which she had alluded, and which he did not at all relish the notion of her joining.

"I thought you had," returned the girl indifferently. "Anyhow, you said that a public singer must reach the top of the tree before she could expect to be noticed in private, and by the time that I have climbed to that height you will have clean forgotten that you were ever acquainted with me."

She did not seem anxious to prolong the discussion. She availed herself of some excuse to beckon to her father, who was seated very near to his donkey's tail, and was placidly smoking a cigar beneath a spreading white umbrella. Lionel perceived that she was not best pleased with him, although he really did not know what he had done to offend her. St. Quintin could have told him, but St. Quintin would not have been believed. Common-sense has but a poor chance against fond illusion, and the obvious must ever remain the incredible to all true lovers.

That Lionel Mallet had enlisted, against his will, in that vast flock of geese was a fact which he had been reluctantly forced to acknowledge. For his weal or for his woe—and much more probably for the latter than the former—he had fallen in love with a face and a voice: the only question was whether his newly-born passion could not be surmounted. To this also St. Quintin could have replied after a fashion at once consolatory and truthful; but it is not the habit of lovers to consult their friends upon such points. Moreover, what friend could have counselled a course more sober and judicious than that which the victim himself had resolved to adopt? There was, to be sure, a certain lack of logic in running away from a danger and imploring it to follow; but that was of the less consequence since it seemed that the prayer was not to be granted.

"Very kind of you to wish it, I'm sure," Colonel Vigne said, soon afterwards, in answer to a remark which Lionel could not refrain from making; "but I don't see my way to visiting London just at present. Unless things have very much changed since I was a young man, London is about the most expensive city in the world."

Lionel could not say that London had changed in the direction of becoming a more economical place of residence; nor could he, as a bachelor, offer hospitality to homeless acquaintances. He looked rather sadly forth upon the wide expanse of hill, forest, and plain that lay beneath him, shimmering in the heat of a cloudless Italian day, while Marietta, who was unpacking the luncheon-basket, glanced over her shoulder to observe:

"Evidently one must have money before one can hope to see London; but, after all, it is not impossible to make money. Perhaps the simplest plan will be for me to marry some rich old gentleman who has not many years of life before him. I shall begin to look out at once."

"My child," remonstrated the Colonel, with a look of grave annoyance, "you ought not to make speeches which would be discreditable if they were true, and which you know very well that you do not mean."

Marietta, sitting upon her heels, displayed her white teeth in a laugh. "*Padre mio*," she returned; "I mean every word of it! There is only one thing really discreditable, and that is to be poor. If you do not believe me, ask Mr. Mallet. I have learnt a great deal from him during the last few days."

CHAPTER V.

FACTA EST ALEA.

DESPITE the perfect weather, and the glorious prospect, and the refreshing breeze, and the agreeable loquacity of Colonel Vigne, that expedition to the ruined watch-tower of the Bargilio was not a success. When one person out of a party of four is bent upon spoiling everything, nothing can prevent him (*à fortiori* her) from succeeding; so Marietta contrived to make two of her companion rather uncomfortable, and the third thoroughly miserable. And what rendered the punishment of the unhappy third especially cruel was his inability to gain her private ear for a single moment. Had she been pleased to accord him what he was at such undisguised pains to obtain, he might have inquired and ascertained the nature of his offence; but she chose to ignore hints which she had been willing enough to take on previous jaunts. She clung resolutely all day to her father, whom she vexed by giving occasional utterance to sentiments of an audaciously cynical character; she provoked the patient St. Quintin into saying things which he did not wish to say, and then gave him to understand that he had behaved quite unlike a gentleman by saying them; as for Lionel, she neither looked at him nor deigned to reply when he spoke to her.

Now all this was, of course, extremely childish, and if she had been older and more experienced, she would have acted in a very different manner; yet, so great is the power of all women over all men, that, crude though her methods were, she attained her purpose, and by the time that the sun had begun to slope towards the west her victims had been reduced to that condition of puzzled, apologetic uneasiness which is so fraught with peril to the male division of the race. Each of them would cheerfully have paid her a sum of money

proportionate to his means not to do it any more. Her father, indeed, actually did go the length of offering her a bribe.

"*Fanciulla mia,*" said he, "you are out of sorts to-day; this hot sun has been too much for you. What can I do to put you in better spirits? There is the little diamond broach that you know of. I had meant to keep it for your birthday; but, after all, why should I make you wait?"

He was promptly rewarded after a fashion very pleasing to him, and in the highest degree exasperating to one of the lookers on. To be embraced and kissed on both cheeks by this exquisitely lovely girl was surely more than an equivalent for any diamonds that Colonel Vigne was likely to possess! But Marietta did not seem to think so; for she continued to lavish caresses upon the triumphant old gentleman, while she murmured in his ear:—

"Oh, how good you are! There is nobody in the world like you!"

St. Quintin, who did not happen to be enamoured of the young lady's olive complexion, lustrous brown eyes, and other charms, thought to himself, "Clever little cat! She knows how to be provocative in more ways than one. Thank God, we're off the first thing to-morrow morning!"

But no such coarse and ignoble suspicions found their way into the sorrowful mind of Lionel Mallet; nor did it even strike him as ominously significant that a present of jewellery should have brought about so complete a change of mood.

Either because she was convinced that there was nobody like her father in the world, or for other reasons which an outraged adorer was unable to surmise, Marietta kept her donkey alongside of that bestridden by Colonel Vigne when the homeward march was begun, and although, after a time, the narrowness of the way made it necessary for her to fall back a little, she took very good care to leave no space for the advance of a

pedestrian. So poor Lionel was fain to plod along sullenly in the rear, only opening his lips every now and then to execrate the rough and stony path by which the descent was being made. But at length, just as his spirits had reached their lowest ebb, the opportunity which he had ceased to expect, or hope for, was suddenly granted to him. It was then evening, and the wooded ravine through which the little procession was making its way was already in twilight. St. Quintin, who had marched on ahead, was out of sight, and the Colonel was disappearing round a shoulder of the hillside, when Marietta pulled up, dismounted, and set to work to tighten her girths. The donkey, after the manner of its kind, proceeded to render that operation difficult by blowing itself out. Lionel, therefore, could do no less than offer assistance.

"Oh, thank you; I am sorry to give you so much trouble," said the girl coldly. "I should not have stopped, only I felt the saddle turning with me."

It took Lionel a minute or two to put matters straight, after which he was once more frigidly thanked, and Marietta declared her intention of trotting on.

"You mustn't think of trotting downhill in the dark over these loose stones," said Lionel decidedly; "you would come down to a certainty, and cut yourself and the donkey all to pieces. Miss Vigne," he added, presently, "would you mind telling me what I have done?"

"What you have done?" she repeated, with a not too successful assumption of interrogative surprise.

"Yes—or left undone. Because it is quite evident that you are angry with me, and when my friends are angry with me, I like, at least, to know the reason. But perhaps you will say that I presume too far in calling you one of my friends."

Marietta had not remounted. She was engaged in tugging at the saddle, to satisfy herself that it was firm, and she had her back turned towards Lionel, of

whose question she took no notice. Presently, however, she whisked round, and said, impatiently:—

"A friend, surely, is somebody whom one has known for a long time, and expects to see or hear of again. But you are quite mistaken in supposing that I am angry with you. Why should I be?"

Lionel observed that that was just what he wanted to know, adding that he could not understand why he had been so ruthlessly snubbed all day if he had committed no offence.

"You remind me of the wolf who complained that the lamb made the water muddy," returned the girl, with a laugh. "As if such an insignificant creature as I am could possibly snub a man of your importance!"

And then, cutting short the rejoinder upon which he had embarked:—

"Oh, I know I have been rude and disagreeable," she went on; "I couldn't help it. I am dreadfully disappointed, if you must have the whole truth. I thought we should go to London this summer. Now it turns out that we are not going, and that nobody cares a straw whether we do or not. It is silly to show temper, but perhaps you would forgive me if you knew how I loathe the sort of life which I seem to be condemned to lead!"

"There is one person, at all events," answered Lionel, in a low voice, "who cares a great deal whether you come to London or not, and who will be quite as much disappointed as you are if you don't. But I am sure you will; I am sure it can be managed."

"In what way?" she asked. "You want to say something pleasant; but of course you know in reality that my day-dreams have come to nothing. The simple truth is that we are too poor; and even if we did contrive to scrape together enough money to take us to England, we should be despised and neglected because of our poverty. Is not that a fact?"

It was so unquestionable a fact that Lionel had no answer at her service, except a deep sigh.

"Consequently," she continued, "I must either live my life out in hotels and *pensions*, which I should not like, or study for the stage, which my father would not like, or, as I said before, marry some rich old man, which perhaps the rich old man would not like. Will you help me to get on this donkey's back, please? He won't stand still."

Lionel complied with her request. In order to do so he had to take her by her ungloved hand, and he did not relax his grasp of her slim fingers after she was seated in the saddle.

"Is it essential that the man should be old?" he whispered, for indeed the fate of most men is apt to be decided in a few moments, not in cold blood, and resolutions of the utmost magnitude are more often formed hastily than deliberately.

Marietta drew her hand away with a jerk. "I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"I mean," replied the young man, "that I love you, and that if you can care enough for me to promise to be my wife——"

"Oh, no," she interrupted, in genuine agitation, "it is impossible!—you cannot be thinking of what you are saying! I never had the least idea—how could you suppose that I had! But perhaps it was natural that you should be sorry for me, and—and that you should imagine things. Please do not say any more; we must hurry on or they will think we are lost." And with a kick of her heel she set her donkey in motion.

But Lionel, if he had made up his mind precipitately, had made it up irrevocably, and Miss Vigne's docile steed was promptly brought to a halt. In matters of controversy or dispute it is an immense advantage to know your own mind, and he who is thus fortified is likely to come off victorious. Marietta, it may be, did not know hers; there is little reason to doubt the sincerity of her declaration that she had not until that moment contemplated the possibility of her ever becoming the future Viscountess Middlewood. Did she

love the handsome wooer who was so ardently urging social greatness upon her? As to that also her mind may have been in a condition of some uncertainty; yet she ended by accepting him, and the thought that she was to be his wife undoubtedly made her very happy. What cast a momentary shadow over the brilliancy of her prospects was his intimation that it would be incumbent upon him to obtain his father's consent to their union.

"But I thought you were independent of your father," she exclaimed in dismay. "Of course he will never consent!—you yourself told me that your people would insist upon your making a great marriage. If we must obey Lord Middlewood's orders——"

"We shall not have to do that; but it is just because I am independent of him—— However, it is rather difficult to explain, and it doesn't really signify. I only meant that our engagement had better not be announced immediately. For that matter I must first of all get Colonel Vigne's consent."

It was scarcely to be anticipated that difficulties would be raised by Colonel Vigne; yet when, at a later hour of the evening, he requested a few minutes' private conversation with his prospective father-in-law, and stated what his hopes and intentions were, he was met with no sort of enthusiasm.

"You have taken me entirely by surprise, Mr. Mallet," the Colonel said, with a troubled look. "One hardly knows what answer to make upon the spur of the moment, except, indeed, to tell you what I should think you must see for yourself, that no definite answer *can* be made. You are very young, and my daughter is still younger; it stands to reason that you cannot really know anything about one another after so short an acquaintance. If you both remain of the same mind at the end of a year, let us say, and if—— But, upon my word, I don't see much use in making further stipulations, because, to speak plainly, I am quite sure that you will not be of the same mind a year hence."

"Which of us do you expect to change?" the young man inquired.

"Well—both, I suppose. But I was thinking more especially of you."

"Then you will find that you are mistaken. I really am neither a fool nor a scoundrel; though I admit that, so far as your knowledge of me goes, that remains to be proved. May I hear the other stipulations?"

"Oh, certainly; you are entitled to hear them.'

Colonel Vigne sighed and laid down his cigar, which he had allowed to go out. It was in the little smoking-room of the hotel, which was partially lighted by an evil-smelling oil lamp, that this interview was being held, and perhaps he found the atmosphere oppressive; for he walked to the window, threw it open, and drew in several long breaths of the cool night air before he resumed: "I am sure you must be amazed, Mr. Mallet, that I do not receive you with open arms. You are rich, I believe; you are well-born; you are, in short, everything that is desirable; and yet a poor old half-pay officer in the Austrian service ventures to impose conditions upon you before he will sanction your betrothal to his daughter! Nevertheless, if you will think of it, that is not, after all, so utterly incomprehensible. What do I wish for? Naturally enough, that my only child should be happy. And as her happiness could not be secured by a marriage of which your family disapproved, I must make the approval of your family a *sine quâ non*."

Lionel nodded. "I am going to write to my father at once," he answered, "and I shall see him as soon as possible. Of course I wish to have his consent, and I told Marietta that I was all the more anxious because it isn't, in the ordinary sense, indispensable. He has been awfully good to me, and I don't like to remind him more than I can help that he has no real power over me."

"In this instance," observed the Colonel, smiling, "he will have just as much power as I choose to give

him. For I, you see, have absolute authority over my daughter, who is legally an infant, and I will not permit her to marry Lord Middlewood's son against Lord Middlewood's will. In other words, my dear young friend, it is most unlikely that this marriage will ever take place. I might say more; there are many other things which might be said; but——"

He stopped short; for Marietta had appeared at the open window, and had evidently heard his last words.

"Why," she asked, "should not our marriage take place, if we are both resolved that it shall? Do not our lives belong to us?"

"Ah, my child," sighed the old man, "I fear that you are laying up sorrow for yourself!"

But she did not heed him. She was looking over his head at Lionel, who promptly advanced and took her hand. They made a splendid couple in respect of physical beauty, and perhaps some of the beauty of the soul was likewise discernible in their shining eyes; for it is certain at that moment they were very deeply in love with one another.

"Is it quite impossible," Marietta resumed, after a short pause, "for us to go to London this summer?"

"You think they will find you irresistible?" her father groaned, reading her thought. "Ah, *poverina!* how little you know!"

But it was not impossible—not actually impossible—for them to undertake that journey. He had a small emergency-fund of uninvested capital (for he was a careful old fellow) at his bankers' which could be made available for the purpose that she mentioned, and something in the expression of her face, which reminded him of her dead mother's, caused him to feel on a sudden that it might be better for her to see with her own eyes and hear with her own ears what no young girl can be expected to believe upon mere hearsay evidence. Suffer, he was afraid, she must; but she would perhaps suffer less and for a shorter time if she were on the

spot than if news of what would seem to her to be treachery should reach her from afar.

So, for reasons which she did not at all comprehend, Marietta obtained the longed-for concession, and of the three people who spent the next half-hour together two looked forward to the future with jubilant confidence. As for the third, he said little, and wished with all his heart that he had some good and experienced woman at his elbow to advise him. In the absence of such a counsellor, he listened to the dictates of common humanity and allowed his daughter an extra ten minutes after his departure to take leave of the man to whom he expressly warned her that she must not regard herself as betrothed.

It was a good deal more than ten minutes later that Lionel, running up stairs two steps at a time, encountered St. Quintin, who said, with visible anxiety:

"I was just going to look for you. What on earth have you been doing all this time?"

"Talking to the Vignes," answered Lionel coolly. "By the way, old chap, I may as well tell you that I am engaged to Miss Vigne."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL.

"It is preposterous and disastrous and everything else that you may please to call it," said Lord Middlewood. "All the same, I don't see what a helpless elderly individual like myself can do but shrug his shoulders and submit."

"My dear Middlewood," remonstrated his mother, "you are always so supine! A man in your position has no right to be supine. If you had listened to me,

instead of shrugging your shoulders, and submitting, years ago, you might have been Prime Minister to-day. Anyhow, you might have been a much more important personage than you are. But at least you *are* Lionel's father."

"Oh, he is kind enough to acknowledge the relationship and some of its corollaries—if that advances matters."

"It ought to retard them!—it ought to squash them! Bless me! is the boy to be allowed to marry a half-bred Italian girl from nobody knows where without a finger being raised to save him? Mind you, I am only speaking as a worldly woman would speak, and because nothing but worldly considerations, I suppose, are likely to have any weight with you. Otherwise I should point out that this young woman, who has been educated in a convent, it seems, must be a Papist, in addition to the rest of her impossibilities."

"By Jove!" muttered Lord Middlewood, "I never thought of that. Thank you: it is a point."

He had driven over to Chelton, Lady Maria Halsted's charming old house, to impart to her the very unwelcome news which had reached him by post that morning—not so much in the hope that she would be able to render him any assistance as because he had felt it almost essential to confide to somebody, no matter whom, what a horrid fix he was in. Chelton, a commodious mansion, built of grey stone and covered on its southern side by creepers, was a far more beautiful and habitable, if far less pretentious, place than Middlewood. Situated in a sheltered and fertile basin of the hills adjoining the Peak district, it looked down upon a lake of respectable area and was surrounded by gardens which at that season of the year were brilliant with daffodils, hyacinths and tulips.

"You always manage to be about a month in advance of us, mother," remarked Lord Middlewood, gazing absently out of the mullioned library window beside

which he was seated. "Where do you get your bulbs?"

"Oh, bother the bulbs!" returned the old lady impatiently. "I'll look out the man's address for you presently, if you want it; but I don't believe your gardener will allow you to interfere. What is more to the purpose is whether your son will allow you to interfere. Just let me see his letter."

"I forgot to bring it with me," Lord Middlewood answered; "but he says exactly what I told you."

"That he has offered marriage to a chance acquaintance whom he picked up at a wayside inn, and that he can give you no information about her, except that she is pretty, that she has a fine voice, and that her father is an Englishman who, for reasons best known to himself, has spent his life in a foreign army. *Really*, Middlewood!"

"Really what?"

"Really I can't understand your wrinkling up your forehead in that distressed way. Lionel, you say, asks your permission. Very well; of course he won't get it. Isn't that sufficient?"

"My dear mother when the Parliament of these realms has passed a bill, it is submitted to the Sovereign in order that it may become law. What do you suppose would happen if the signature of the Sovereign were to be withheld?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Lady Maria.

"Well, I'm afraid I do. All power and all authority in this world, you will find, rests ultimately upon the possession of the wherewithal to keep things going. Ninety-nine fathers out of a hundred can threaten to cut their sons off with a shilling; I can't employ that threat, for the very good reason that my son doesn't draw a shilling out of my pocket. Consequently, if I were so foolish as to threaten him, the chances are that he would, metaphorically speaking, raise his thumb to his nose, and that I should have to look the other way."

"He would never be so vulgar and so undutiful! Besides, I trust that he is not entirely devoid of religious principle. As for this scrape, I foresaw that something of the sort was very likely to occur, and I warned the bear-leader that he would get himself into trouble if he didn't keep a sharp look-out. By the way, what has the bear-leader to say for himself?"

"St. Quintin? Oh, he writes in the deepest consternation, poor young man, and assures me that he did his best. I have no doubt he did. Bad, of necessity, was his best, and bad, I greatly fear, will be mine. Frankly now, mother, what step would you take, if you were in my place?"

Lady Maria pursed up her lips and gave her head a little shake. It was not often that her son did her the honour to consult her, and she rather liked being consulted.

"If I am to imagine myself in your place," she replied, "I must begin by imagining myself what, as you know, I am not—that is to say, a woman of worldly mind."

"I should think that by applying the whip and spur vigorously to your imagination you might accomplish that. What would you do if you were a woman of worldly mind?"

"Well," answered the old lady, "I suppose I should endeavour to find a substitute—or substitutes. And I should temporise. Naturally Lionel will spend this season in London, where he will meet quite a large number of people whom he has never seen before. If you shrink from direct prohibition—and, upon second thoughts, I believe you are right there—surely you may bargain for delay. No engagement until next August; that is what I should say if I were in your place, and if I held the opinions that you hold."

"You are so near holding them," observed Lord Middlewood, with a faint smile, "that it doesn't seem to make much practical difference. Well, one can but try. What with the religious question and what with

the Machiavellian policy that you suggest, one may even succeed—who knows? Anyhow, it appears that the young lady's father does me the honour to declare his determination to be guided by my wishes."

"That, of course, only shows that he knows what he is about," said Lady Maria. "His daughter's position would be rather uncomfortable if the marriage were to take place without the countenance of Lionel's family, and he would be a greater goose than he probably is if he did not attempt to win us over to his side. By the way, have you said anything about this to Betty?"

"I have not," answered Lord Middlewood rather hastily; "I see no necessity for telling children about such matters. May I hope that you will exercise the same—er—prudent reticence?"

"I shall avoid the subject, since you wish me to do so," said Lady Maria; "but really you ought to be ashamed of yourself! What business has a mere chit of a girl to put in her word? And what value can her views about her brother's marriage have, one way or the other?"

"None whatever. All the same, she has a knack of giving effect to her views, which, in this instance, are not unlikely to be romantic. And that is why you are just as much in awe of her as I am, my dear mother."

"*I!*—in awe of Betty!" cried Lady Maria. "What dreadful nonsense you sometimes talk, Middlewood! The child has been spoilt, I grant you; but certainly never by me."

"Ah!—well, we'll keep it dark for the present, at any rate," said Lord Middlewood drily. "Meanwhile, I am invited to take Betty over to Ludworth as soon as Lionel arrives, and that is the sort of invitation which can't very well be declined."

"She could come to me while you were there."

"She could; but I doubt whether she would. After all, the point is not of much importance in the actual

stage of affairs. What we must endeavour to secure is breathing time—which we probably shall secure."

It was quite probable that they would. Lionel, who, following closely upon the heels of his letter, reached his own house a few days later, was prepared to make any reasonable concession.

"I think the governor has behaved very well, you know," he said to the friend who had accompanied him. "He doesn't like it, and he couldn't be expected to like it; but he keeps his temper and admits that he will have to give in, if I am in earnest. It only remains to convince him that I am in earnest."

"I must say that I wish you weren't!" sighed St. Quintin.

St. Quintin had said that several times already. He had also done what in him lay tc convince Lionel that a man could not really be in earnest about a resolution so abruptly formed. But when it was pointed out to him that an honourable man who has made an offer of marriage must abide by his word or cease to be honourable, what could he do but observe a sorrowful silence? Lionel, as he knew, was both honourable and obstinate—besides being in love and a free agent: escape seemed well-nigh impossible. There was, to be sure, just a chance that Colonel Vigne's pride might prove genuine and that he would withdraw before Lord Middlewood's opposition; but it was not much of a chance. How could it be? St. Quintin looked out of the window at the terraces and gardens, the deer-park beyond, and the broad, distant acres which formed a part of the fortunate owner of Ludworth's inheritance, and said to himself that in all conscience there could be no such chance.

"It's a jolly old place, isn't it?" said Lionel.

It was as delightful a residence as any well-to-do country gentleman could wish to possess. The red-brick house, constructed in the early years of the seventeenth century, had been added to by successive occupants without any marked or distressing departure from

the original design, and as it had never, through all its vicissitudes, been suffered to fall out of repair, it was now an almost perfect specimen of its class of edifice. During Lionel Mallet's long minority the establishment had been carefully maintained and the furniture renewed, when necessary; so that Ludworth was ready at all points to receive its destined mistress.

"Yes, it's a jolly old place," agreed St. Quintin. "One can't help wondering," he was fain to add, "what the county will say if you bring Miss Marietta Vigne to preside over it."

"I don't know that I particularly care what Cheshire may say," returned Lionel, with a touch of arrogance; "but if I did care, I should feel quite easy upon the subject. Marietta is pretty sure of being admired and liked anywhere."

A young man who neither liked nor greatly admired Miss Vigne could but remain eloquently mute. "Your father and Miss Mallet are to arrive to-morrow, aren't they?" he asked presently.

Lionel nodded. "Yes; and I hope they will stay some time. We always used to spend the spring months here before I came of age; but now I am expected to give a formal invitation, and there's no certainty about its being accepted."

But Miss Betty, when she arrived that afternoon, announced that she had come to pay her brother a prolonged visit. She had brought most of her belongings, including a hack and a couple of wire-haired terriers with her, she said, and she did hope that nobody had been disturbing the badgers' earths, because she particularly wanted to find out whether the dogs were worth anything or not.

"All right, Betty," answered her brother; "we'll look up the badgers to-morrow. If your terriers get killed don't blame me, that's all. No dog of mine will ever be allowed to play that game, I can tell you; but I don't presume to offer advice to such a determined person as you are."

"Advice," remarked Betty coolly, "is one of those things which it is more blessed to give than to receive. From what I hear you are going to receive some, and I hope you'll like it."

This speech, which caused Lord Middlewood to raise his eyebrows, brought a slight flush to Lionel's cheeks; but Betty at once changed the subject, and no further allusion was made to circumstances about which everybody present was thinking. Not until after dinner was Lionel requested to accompany his father to the smoking-room, whither St. Quintin discreetly refrained from following the pair.

Lord Middlewood lighted a cigar and opened fire with:

"I should like to have my position defined, please. Am I to understand that I have the power to forbid this engagement of yours?"

Lionel was afraid he could not go quite so far as to say that. Certainly he wished very much to have his father's sanction and approval; but, if these were unhappily to be refused to him, he would still feel bound by his pledged word. On the other hand, Colonel Vigne had made it a distinct condition that the assent of the Mallet family should be secured.

"H'm!—meaning what he said?" Lord Middlewood inquired.

"I think he is an honest man and a gentleman," answered Lionel simply.

"Well, let us give him the benefit of the doubt, if there is a doubt. And there generally is, you know; because, after all, gentlemen form a small minority and honest men, perhaps, an even smaller one. Taking him at his word, and assuming him to be sincere, I don't think he or you or Miss Vigne can fairly complain if I ask for a little extension of time."

"Of course not," Lionel agreed readily. "Naturally, you must see her before you can speak positively, and I hope you will see her soon; for they have promised to come to London."

"Really? Then suppose I were to name the 1st of August as the date upon which I shall be prepared to answer 'Yes or no?'"

"Couldn't you make it the 1st of July? The fact is that they are not well off, and I know they can't easily afford a long stay in London."

"So be it," answered Lord Middlewood, after a moment of reflection. "But I don't undertake to make a favourable reply upon the first of any month, mind. Many objections might be urged against this proposed match; but, as you are not a fool, you cannot require me to point them out to you, and I fully understand that I can only dictate terms to you on sufferance. One thing, however, I should like to say—not as your father, but simply as a friend. You are not, and you cannot at present be, in any way bound; when you talk about your pledged word, you forget that the pledge has not been accepted. Colonel Vigne, you tell me, makes his consent to the engagement conditional; therefore no actual engagement exists."

"I can't take that view," said Lionel. "Marietta is not bound; but I consider that I am."

Lord Middlewood smiled and did not insist. He was a man of experience and discrimination; he had obtained as much as he could reasonably hope to obtain, and he judged it advisable to leave well alone. While he finished his cigar, he asked a few not unsympathetic questions respecting Miss Vigne's personal appearance, and listened indulgently to the panegyric upon which his son was tempted to embark. He had the air—and he wished to have the air—of not taking matters more seriously than courtesy required.

Meanwhile, Betty and St. Quintin, who had been left to entertain one another in the drawing-room, were keeping up an animated conversation.

"Know all about it?—rather!" the young lady was saying. "Granny has no secrets from me. For several reasons I suspected that something was up; so I drove over to Chelton at once and put her through her cate-

chism. She said I mustn't betray her to papa, because she had promised not to tell me, but that perhaps I ought to know. Naturally I agreed with her that I ought to know; I am not so sure that I agree with her and you in deploring what has happened. It all depends, you see, upon what this Miss Vigne may be like. For my own part, I fancy that I might prefer her to some smart London girl, who would give herself airs and very likely try to patronise me. Clear your mind of prejudice now; and let us hear, without fear or favour, what you think of her."

St. Quintin gave an impartial description of Marietta, which was necessarily a favourable one, since he really knew of nothing to her disadvantage. He did not think that either by birth or (so far as he could judge) by character she was particularly well fitted to become Lionel's wife; but that, as his hearer reminded him, was a mere question of personal opinion.

"From what you tell me," she remarked, "I am disposed to think that I shall take Lionel's side. What is the use of being the sort of person that he is if you can't consult your own inclinations? Of course it wouldn't do for him to marry a barmaid; but your Marietta sounds quite decent, and it is a point in her favour that she is pretty sure not to be bumptious. Yes; I think I shall back her up."

"Perhaps," observed St. Quintin mildly, "you won't be consulted."

Betty had ensconced herself in a low easy chair and was nursing her knee, round which her well-shaped, but slightly sunburnt, hands were clasped. "Oh, you think I stand in need of being snubbed, do you?" said she.

St. Quintin protested that he had never said that.

"You think so, though. Well, you may snub me every now and then, if you like; I sha'n't mind. After all, it makes a change, and, as I remember telling you before you went away, I have an idea that we shall be friends, you and I. As for my being consulted by papa

and granny, you may depend upon it that I shall. I don't mean that they will ask me in so many words to decide for them; but I can always make them decide as I wish."

"If you have all that power," returned St. Quintin, "I hope you will use it wisely, and I can't think it would be in any way wise——"

But the entrance of Lord Middlewood and Lionel compelled him to leave his sentence unfinished.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE EXILES.

MARIETTA, after the two young Englishmen had left Ponte a Serraglio, felt assured of one thing, amongst many which seemed to be uncertain; she could not and did not doubt that Lionel loved her. And she on her side loved him—not, perhaps, with that intense and passionate devotion of which she had sometimes suspected that her nature was capable, yet quite enough for all practicable purposes. But this brace of convictions, though to some extent comforting, did not avail to keep her spirits from sinking, as one long, solitary day followed another, and the difficulties which the future held in reserve became more and more apparent to her. It is always a doleful and discouraging experience to be left behind; the Baths of Lucca had little to offer in the shape of company or amusements, whereas London, by all accounts, would provide a young man of fortune with as great a variety of both as he could desire, and an even greater variety than was likely to be good for him. The absent, alas! can never be wholly free from the fear of being forgotten. She received letters to be sure, and the sentiments expressed therein

gave no ground for complaint; but Lionel had not yet been put to the test; his ordeal was still to come, and she would not be upon the spot at a time when even her slight and theoretical knowledge of the world and human nature warned her that her presence might be needed.

"Patience, my child, patience!" her father said, with a melancholy smile. "I have promised to take you to England, and I will keep my word. But we must not appear to be too eager. Believe me, that would be an error. It is for Mr. Mallet to beckon to us, not for us to pursue him."

And supposing that Mr. Mallet should omit to beckon? Marietta was ashamed to suggest what she knew that her father regarded as by no means improbable; and the consequence was that two people who had until lately had the prospect of living very happily together were now sad and ill at ease in one another's society. The Colonel, who had only his child to live for, and who, on returning from active service, had rather absurdly promised himself two or three years of her undivided affection, was a little sore at her readiness to quit him upon such very brief provocation, added to which he had no desire to fly at high game. Marietta, for her part, could not help resenting her father's apparent disinclination to further her advancement in life. If he was not consciously selfish, he was at least somewhat oblivious of a parent's first duties, she thought. He might have understood that only a short period of sunshine is granted to girls in which to make their hay, and that they have as good a right to be haymakers as anybody else.

However, she forgave him when at length he announced to her that she had better begin packing up her trunks in preparation for their northward journey.

"Mr. Mallet has taken rooms for us in London," he said. "Perhaps you know that?"

She shook her head. "I have not heard for more than a week," she answered. "In his last letter he

said that he hoped we should meet soon, but that everything depended upon you."

"Ah, well, I wrote to him just about a week ago, and his reply has come by telegram. Perhaps I ought to have mentioned that I heard some time since from his father, Lord Middlewood."

"You have heard from Lord Middlewood!" cried the girl, eagerly. "But that is most important! What sort of a letter was it?"

"It was the letter of a gentleman, I should say. Civil; but not, of course, particularly enthusiastic. He asked a number of questions which I am not sure that he was quite entitled to ask, considering that you are not engaged to Mr. Mallet, and he candidly confessed that he could have wished for a rather more aristocratic alliance. For the rest, it had been agreed upon between him and his son that there should be no definite betrothal before the close of the London season—and he hoped I should see the reasonableness of that. So I replied that I did, and I answered some of his questions, and I begged him to believe (but I am sure he won't) that I differed from him in not coveting aristocratic alliances."

"I think it was rather a pity to say that," observed Marietta, thoughtfully. "We may not be great people; but our blood, after all, is as good as his, I dare say. If you had told him that the Magliacci——"

"The Magliacci," interrupted the Colonel, rather sharply, "don't count. Our name is Vigne." He added, in a gentler tone, "Marietta, *mia*, do not be deceived. It is worth no woman's while to marry a man whom she does not love, for the sake of becoming great or rich; but it is worth her while—yes, I believe it is worth her while—to marry a man whom she does love, even if he does not belong to her own class. Only then she must be prepared for some troubles and vexations."

Marietta smiled. Troubles and vexations might possibly be in store for her; but at any rate the vexa-

tion of eating her heart out in that remote Italian watering-place was at an end, and Lord Middlewood's letter did not sound to her unpromising. She was going to London; that was the main point—the sole essential point, indeed.

The journey, that weary uninteresting journey across France which many of us know only too well—was a pure delight to her; the crowded streets, the glittering shop-fronts and the smart equipages of Paris made her mouth water, and her heart beat with a premonition of what she was about to conquer; if the sight of Dover Castle did not rouse her to any especially high pitch of patriotic exultation, it brought home to her the glad certainty that Lionel and London were now within two hour's reach. Perhaps London and Lionel would have been a more accurate method of expressing what she longed for; yet the latter would have been an exacting lover, indeed, if he had been dissatisfied with the smile of recognition which she accorded to him when the train drew up at the Charing-cross platform. The simple truth is that she was very glad indeed to see him.

"So you have come to meet us," she said, as he opened the door of the railway-carriage and helped her to descend.

"Did you suppose that I shouldn't come?" he returned.

She had not been absolutely certain about it. During the previous quarter of an hour vague forebodings and misgivings had taken possession of her; it was, after all, conceivable—eminently probable, Lord Middlewood and her father would have said—that Lionel, released from the spell which had bewitched him in distant Tuscany, might wish to be off his half-concluded bargain. Here, however, he was to answer for his fidelity by glances which there was no misinterpreting, and very nice he looked in his long frock-coat, and his carefully brushed tall hat. Marietta was pleased with him, proud of him, even a trifle shy of him, under

that altered guise. But in everything save attire he was unchanged; it was his prompt and successful endeavour to satisfy her of that.

"I have taken rooms for you in Seymour-street," he told her father, rather apologetically. "It isn't a very fashionable quarter; but——"

"My dear sir," interrupted Colonel Vigne, "I should never have forgiven you if you had taken rooms for us in a very fashionable quarter. My knowledge of London is quite out of date; but I remember that Seymour-street used to be considered highly respectable, and I trust that it is not still too expensive for paupers like us. I had prepared myself for Bloomsbury."

He was, as a matter of fact, prepared to spend a certain sum (not arising out of income) which would have justified a temporary sojourn upon the outskirts of favoured districts; but of course he did not want to be more extravagant than he could help; so that he was proportionately gratified and surprised when, on reaching the excellent lodgings which Lionel had secured for him and his daughter, he learned how trifling would be the rent demanded for them. The landlady, had she been so minded, could have given him reasons for her moderation; but she was a discreet woman. It had, indeed, been made worth her while to be discreet.

"I suppose it is all right," the old gentleman remarked to his daughter, after their capable friend had left them, promising to look in again on the following morning; "but I had no idea that it was possible to live so inexpensively in London. The thing couldn't be done in Vienna; I am quite sure of that."

Marietta had no doubt that it was all right. Suspicions which had not suggested themselves to the ingenious mind of her father (for Colonel Vigne would never, except upon very strong evidence, have suspected a friend of his of insulting him by paying his bills) she may have had; but they did not trouble her.

It seemed to her the most simple thing in the world that Lionel Mallet, who was rich, should come to the aid of one who was poor and whom he loved. And he did love her; he had not changed; she had nothing to fear from the sirens of fashionable London. Of that much he had contrived to convince her between Charing-cross and Seymour-street: she was now certain that this was the very last time she would ever have to take up her abode in lodgings.

She had a moment of annoyance the next day, when her father expressed some reluctance to dine with Mr. Mallet at the Berkeley restaurant and go on to the Opera afterwards.

"This is not quite what I bargained for," the perplexed Colonel said; "this looks rather too much like taking things for granted. I thought Lord Middlewood would have been here."

"Well, he is coming," answered Marietta impatiently.

"So I understand; but neither you nor young Mallet ought to be committed until he comes—if then. I don't like the idea of his escorting you to the Opera."

"Where not a single creature will know us!"

"A good many creatures will know him. I am much obliged to him for his politeness; but I think for the present we had better decline all such invitations."

Marietta sank down upon a sofa, spreading out her hands with a gesture of despair. "Father," she exclaimed piteously, "why are you so cruel to me! Why are you determined to do everything you can to spoil my life?"

Her eyes became suffused with tears; the corners of her mouth drooped. What could a fond parent do but plead for pardon and protest that he had no dearer wish than to see her happy?

So the trio dined at Lionel's expense, notwithstanding a futile attempt on Colonel Vigne's part to pay his share of the bill, and when they took their places in the stalls at Covent Garden later, not a few opera-

glasses were directed at the lovely girl in the ill-fitting gown whom nobody could identify. Italian opera had been revived in London that season, after a protracted period of neglect; it had once more, as in years long past and forgotten, become the right thing to frequent the big Covent Garden theatre, and the auditorium was as brilliant as jewels and gay clothing could make it.

But Marietta, for the moment, took no heed of her fellow-spectators. Her eyes were riveted upon the stage, which the risen curtain had just revealed, and very soon her ears were astonished and enchanted by the first clear, soaring notes of the best-trained soprano voice in the world. Only once before—when her father had taken her to La Scala at Milan—had she been within the walls of an opera-house; never before had she heard anything at all resembling the performance to which she was now privileged to listen, and the effect of it was to move her to tears of mingled enthusiasm and despair. For she knew enough about music and enough about singing to realise the extravagance of certain personal aspirations in which she had indulged at odd times. More than once, during the progress of the first act, her neighbour addressed her, without eliciting any reply. She had clean forgotten him; she had forgotten everything and everybody, except that glorious, triumphant *prima donna*, who seemed to her to be the happiest of created beings, and in whose shoes she would willingly have given twenty years of life to stand. However, as this absorption made her look exceedingly beautiful, Lionel smiled and pardoned it. When the curtain had fallen amidst prolonged plaudits, to which she contributed her share, he said:

"You are not disappointed so far, then?"

"Disappointed!" she exclaimed—"who could be? Oh, if one had a voice like that!"

"Oh, it's a fine voice, of course. As for me, I make so bold as to prefer yours," said Lionel audaciously. And as the look of disdainful incredulity which she

turned upon him seemed to imply that that compliment was rather more than she could swallow, he made haste to add: "Not that I have any pretension to be a judge. By the way, I should like, if you don't mind, to introduce you and Colonel Vigne to my cousin Lady Gosport, who is sitting just over there and who *does* pretend to be something of a judge."

The occasion would have been somewhat ill-chosen for an introduction of that nature if Lady Gosport had not been previously prepared for it; but it is scarcely necessary to say that Lionel had prepared her. She was a tall, lean woman, with a large nose, dull, prominent gray eyes, a wealthy, elderly husband and no children. Having a strong desire to shine in some capacity, and being really rather fond of music, she had of late years attained to a certain measure of celebrity by means of giving excellent private concerts. She had, therefore, no objection to shaking hands with a young person who, by Lionel's account, was likely to prove useful. Her method of shaking hands, which seemed to imitate the front action of a high-stepping charger, struck the uninitiated Marietta as peculiar; but no fault could be found with the startled admiration of her gaze. It was the first of many such involuntary acts of homage which Miss Vigne was destined to receive, and she found it highly acceptable.

Lady Gosport had not much to say; various correctly attired gentlemen were waiting to speak to her, and after she had made some indistinct allusion to a forthcoming party at her house—"Quite informal; only amateurs this time, so you need not be afraid of joining them"—she had the air of dismissing Colonel Vigne and his daughter, who returned to their stalls. But she plucked at Lionel's sleeve to detain him, and ejaculated:

"What a perfectly splendid creature! Does her voice match her face?"

"Well, almost," answered Lionel.

"Good gracious! you will have to wear a coat of

mail over your heart. The father looks a spruce, tidy sort of old thing. A gentleman?"

"Of course."

"I don't see why. Didn't you tell me that you had picked him up in some foreign watering-place?"

"I met them in Italy. But you ought to know that I should never have thought of introducing them to you unless they had been all right."

"Oh, *I'm* not particular; I have to put up with all sorts of horrors because they can play or sing. But I won't be responsible for your friends, mind."

"I thought I heard you inviting them to a party just now."

"Exactly so; I invited them to a party. If that will do them any good they're welcome. But I am not going to aid and abet in scandals, and I am not going to get myself into a row with Aunt Maria."

Lionel was about to protest indignantly against the association of Miss Vigne's name with such a word as scandal; but the crash of the orchestra drowned his opening words and sent him back to his seat. After all he had not done so badly; for whether Lady Gosport chose to be rude or polite, she could not now help serving as a stepping-stone, and he had an intuition that nothing more than a stepping-stone would be required. Indeed, Miss Vigne made other fresh acquaintances before that first evening of her appearance in London society was at an end; for during the second *entr'act* several men begged Lionel to present them to her. He was not quite so keen about introducing men as ladies; still he could hardly refuse, and two of them happened to be influential persons, with influential wives. Evidently Marietta's success was assured in advance of her having sung a note.

His brougham was waiting, on the conclusion of the performance, to take Colonel and Miss Vigne back to Seymour-street, whither he himself followed them in a hansom. Marietta had gone up stairs when he reached the house; but the Colonel had remained in the hall

to offer him, as in duty bound, a cigar and something to drink.

"We have had a most delightful evening, and we are greatly indebted to you," the old gentleman declared; "but I hope you will not think me very ungrateful if I say that I would rather you did not make any more engagements for us or with us until after your father's arrival."

"Do you mean that I am to live in the same town with you and see nothing of you?" asked the dismayed Lionel.

"No; I only mean that I do not wish to be accused afterwards of having taken unfair advantages. Humble as I am, I hold to preserving my self-respect, and for my daughter's sake, I must give nobody the right to say that I have tried to compromise you. I am sure you will understand that. Now, if you will go into the drawing-room, you will find Marietta there, and I will join you as soon as I have changed my coat."

It did not take him long to change his coat: he felt that he really ought not to be too dilatory over a proceeding which he was, nevertheless, not hard-hearted enough to omit altogether. But, brief as the time accorded to the lovers was, it sufficed for the interchange of assurances which were satisfactory to both of them.

"Only I do wish," sighed Marietta pensively, after certain highly complimentary remarks had been addressed to her—"you will think me silly, I dare say; but I do wish that I were not so dreadfully shabby!"

"Shabby!" ejaculated Lionel, in genuine amazement. "But you are splendid! That was the adjective that Clara Gosport applied to you, and she couldn't have hit upon a more appropriate one."

The girl smiled and shook her head. "She could not possibly have meant it. *She* was splendid, if you like; her dress must have cost a small fortune."

"Her dress?—oh, very likely it did. But I suspect that she would gladly exchange all the dresses in her wardrobe for your face."

"You say that because you are a man. When I am her age nobody will care to look twice at my face. I wonder whether even you will!"

He made the reply that anybody else would have made.

"But perhaps," resumed Marietta, "I also may be wearing diamonds and brocade then." She added, with innocent candour and emphasis, "Oh, how glad I am that you are a rich man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A FACILE TRIUMPH.

If there was one thing which bored poor Lord Gosport more than another—and, for his misfortune, he was bored by most things—it was a musical entertainment at home. He himself detested music almost as much as he detested poetry, which was saying a good deal, and often he wished that his big house in Whitehall Gardens were not so big as to admit of the setting apart of one reception room for vocal and instrumental purposes.

"If this confounded concert-hall, or whatever you like to call it, that's the ruin of us," he remarked despondently to a crony of his one evening. "If we had only a couple of drawing-rooms, like other people, Clara wouldn't find professionals and amateurs so ready to jump at her invitations, and we should escape this perpetual squeaking and squawking."

"Well, you aren't compelled to listen to it," observed his friend. "With so much space at your command, you ought always to be able to withdraw out of earshot, I should think."

The little sandy-haired man shook his head sadly.

"I'm compelled to be within call, though," he answered. "Of course one does make a bolt for the smoking-room when one sees that some wretch or other is going to howl for the next quarter of an hour."

However, he maintained his position in the doorway now, notwithstanding the obvious purpose for which a tall young lady, with whom he was not acquainted, was being conducted by his wife towards the grand piano. If Lord Gosport's ear was uneducated, his eyes were appreciative, and he said to himself that it was many years since he had beheld such a handsome girl as this. So he remained where he was for the pleasure of staring at her, and his admiration survived the song with which she presently favoured a select assemblage, though he thought it a great pity that she should do her best to spoil her beauty by opening her mouth so wide.

"I haven't the most distant idea," he said, in answer to numerous eager queries which were addressed to him as soon as her performance came to an end; "my wife is always picking up fresh geniuses from nobody knows where. But I shall make so bold as to request the honour of an introduction to this one; for she is far and away the most beautiful woman in the room. One of the best-dressed too, in my humble opinion."

The latter compliment would have perhaps been more grateful to Marietta Vigne, had she overheard it, than the former. The achievements of a first-class dressmaker are not to be secured at a few days' notice; yet with energy, personal skill, and the pecuniary aid of an indulgent father wonders may be accomplished; and it is a fact that the bluish-green gown which she had selected fitted her admirably. Not every dark-haired woman can dare to array herself in green: that is why the tint had recommended itself to its present wearer. For the rest, she was blissfully conscious of looking her best. If the admiring throng by which she was surrounded could not tell her in so many words what they thought about her looks, their expressive countenances spoke for them, while there was no reason

in the world why she should not be told that she had sung divinely. The fat German, who had played her accompaniment, had to revert to his own language to express his guttural enthusiasm; Lady Gosport went near to embracing her; other people had the air of longing to go a step further than Lady Gosport, and when the universal entreaty for a second song had been granted, the songstress knew that her victory had been won.

It had been won with such ridiculous ease too! That was the reflection which was passing through her mind, as she stood, with sparkling eyes and slightly flushed cheeks, upon that bloodless battle-field. She had, to be sure, felt an astonishing confidence in herself—a confidence engendered by the perusal of romances in which the heroine had had some such experience as had just fallen to her lot—but she had also had misgivings, now happily allayed. No heroine of romance could have scored a triumph more prompt or more absolute; London (at least, to her delighted imagination) was already on its knees before her; her only regret was that Lord Middlewood was not present to recognise the futility of rejecting so brilliant a daughter-in-law.

Even that regret would have been spared her if she had had the curiosity to inquire the name of the pallid, gray-bearded man in the doorway who, as she guessed, was at that moment inquiring her own. Lord Gosport, who had informed himself, was now able to reply:

"She's a Miss Vigne; Lionel brought her here, I'm told. Devilish good-looking girl, isn't she?"

"Oh, my prophetic soul!" murmured Lord Middlewood; "I thought as much! Yes; she is, as you say, a devilish good-looking girl."

"Why do you look so glum about it?" asked the other. "Do we owe this very unusual honour to paternal anxiety? I didn't even know that you were in London."

"I arrived last night," answered Lord Middlewood, "and in the course of the afternoon somebody told me

that Clara had a party. So I ventured to dispense with an invitation."

"But not for the sake of seeing Clara or me, I presume. Anything up between Lionel and our fair friend at the piano?"

Lord Middlewood did not think it necessary to make any reply to his cousin's flippant question. He had caught sight of Lionel, whom he followed and touched on the elbow, and who exclaimed, "Hullo!" in accents of extreme surprise.

"Why not?" said the old man. "You sent for me, didn't you?"

"I hoped you would come soon, and I'm very glad you *have* come; but I never should have expected to see you at an entertainment of this kind."

"My dear fellow, I am prepared for any sacrifice of personal comfort. Besides, I had a sort of presentment of what was in store for me. Nothing, I must admit, could be more dramatic."

"In what way dramatic?"

"In every way. The young person's singular beauty, the very clever fashion after which you have contrived to launch her, the success which everybody can perceive that she is going to have. It only remains for me to beg the favour of an introduction."

"Do you really want to be introduced to her?" asked Lionel, who was sometimes a little puzzled to discover what his father was driving at.

Lord Middlewood answered that he really did; and without much delay he was enabled to satisfy himself that, whatever Miss Vigne's origin might be, her manners were those of a lady. His own manners were perfect. His somewhat old-world courtesy, his gracefully-turned compliments and the tact with which he avoided any direct allusion to her relations with his son, while mentioning that he had heard of their meeting at the Baths of Lucca, charmed Marietta, who soon became quite at her ease with him. At first she was rather shy; but he did not seem to notice her shyness. He was

amiable, talkative, friendly even—how could she doubt that he also might be added to the list of her captives and that his opposition was no longer a thing to be dreaded? But all the time his shrewd old eyes, which were seldom raised to hers, were reading her like a book, his keen ears were listening to every inflection of her voice, and before their conversation closed he knew a good deal more about her than Lionel did—more, perhaps, than she knew about herself. Not for nothing had Lord Middlewood devoted many hours of his life to the study of his species.

And if he had little difficulty in arriving at certain definite conclusions respecting Marietta, he had still less in classifying her father, with whom he presently shook hands. Colonel Vigne, indeed, was too obviously simple a person to be suspected of concealing duplicity beneath a show of straightforwardness. He drew his interlocutor aside and plunged into the midst of a delicate business with an absence of tact and discretion which could not fail to tell in his favour.

"I am sure you must take us for adventurers, Lord Middlewood; but the truth is that we are nothing of the sort. We are only a couple of *bourgeois*, with whom you cannot possibly wish to be connected by marriage. I neither expected nor desired your son and my daughter to fall in love with one another; but the thing has happened, and now the question is, what is to be done? I told him that I would not give my consent unless you gave yours. More than that I could hardly say; for my daughter's happiness, after all, is the most important consideration, so far as I am concerned."

"Quite so," agreed Lord Middlewood, smiling. "Your conduct throughout, my dear sir, has been, if I may be permitted to say so, absolutely correct. For my own part I have nothing to add to what I wrote to you, except that, after having seen your daughter, I can fully enter into the feelings of my son. It is understood between us—is it not?—that matters are to remain in abeyance for the present. Meanwhile, I hope

to become better acquainted with you and Miss Vigne. Will you not come and lunch with us to-morrow in Arlington-street, if you have no better engagement?"

"You are very kind," answered the Colonel, to whom, in truth, this invitation seemed to be a very kind one; "but—is there not some danger of your hospitality being misunderstood by the young people? If they are to be disappointed in the end—and I am afraid they will be—ought we to give them encouragement in the beginning?"

Lord Middlewood smiled again. "I think you may come to luncheon with a clear conscience," said he. "I cannot prevent Lionel from marrying your daughter——"

"But I can," interrupted the Colonel.

"Do you really think so? Well, anyhow, it is not by raising futile obstacles that we shall discourage him. You have been so candid with me, Colonel Vigne, that the least I can do is to be candid with you, and I will confess that in my opinion Lionel has made up his mind in far too great a hurry. Perhaps Miss Vigne may be in the same case. Let us give them every opportunity of meeting one another—and of meeting other young men and women. Then, whether their intimacy results in an engagement or not, nobody will be to blame."

"I am surprised," the Colonel could not help saying, "that you do not make more of the difference between our social position and yours."

This was momentarily embarrassing for Lord Middlewood, who, at the bottom of his heart, thought that that difference was considerable. But he made haste to reply:

"My dear sir, you speak as an Austrian officer; in this country everybody is *hoffähig*. Besides, Miss Vigne was telling me just now that her mother belonged to the Magliacci family, which is a much older one than ours, I believe. I remember a Count Cesare Magliacci, who was Chamberlain to the Grand Duke of Tuscany——"

"I know nothing about him," broke in Colonel Vigne, rather roughly. "I am sorry that Marietta should have mentioned her mother's relations, with whom we have never been upon speaking terms. My marriage, I ought to tell you, was a runaway marriage, and at that time it was considered an unpardonable offence for an Italian to become the wife of an Austrian."

Lord Middlewood raised his eyebrows slightly. "Indeed? I should have thought that officials connected with the Court of Tuscany—however, it is no business of mine. Pray believe that we are very happy to welcome you and Miss Vigne for your own sakes."

To ask Colonel Vigne to believe that was to impose a rather severe strain upon his credulity; but he believed, at all events, that Lord Middlewood was animated by a desire to deal politely with him; and on the way home he informed his daughter of the honour which was in store for her.

"Oh, I know," she answered; "Lionel told me that it had been arranged."

"My dear," remonstrated the Colonel, "you must not speak of Mr. Mallet by his Christian name. You have not the right to do so, and very likely you may never have the right."

Marietta laughed; her conviction was that all manner of rights and privileges were already hers. Her head, no doubt, was a little turned by the adulation which had been lavished upon her; it would have been an extraordinarily strong head if it had not. Men, young and old, had tumbled over one another in their eagerness to secure a word with her; ladies of high degree had expressed an amiable determination to call in Seymour-street; nothing seemed more improbable than that her hopes would now be dashed to the ground. So it was with serene confidence in the future that she alighted at the door of Lord Middlewood's family mansion the next day.

That highly desirable residence, which of late years

had invariably been let during the season, impressed her a good deal, to be sure, by its size, its splendour, and the number of swift-footed domestics which it appeared to contain; but, on the other hand, the greeting of Betty Mallet, who received the strangers, was the reverse of intimidating.

"How do you do?" the girl said. "Awfully good of you to come! Will you sit yourselves down somewhere, please, the others will be in presently."

"The others" meant only Lord Middlewood and his son, who soon entered together, and who approached the chair beside the open window, overlooking the Green Park, which Marietta had chosen. They were evidently upon excellent terms—would they have been upon such good terms if there had been any serious matter of difference between them?—the elder alluded in gracefully selected language to the sensation which their guest had created on the previous evening; the younger looked both proud and happy. And during the informal repast which followed, Marietta was made to feel quite at home. "It is as if I were one of the family!" she said to herself.

But that was assuming a shade too much. When, after luncheon was over and the three men had been left to smoke cigarettes in the dining-room, she was conducted up stairs again by Betty, the latter gave her to understand quite candidly that she had better not leap to hasty conclusions. Other remarks, equally candid, but by no means unfriendly, had preceded this warning, and it was Marietta's responsive confessions which prompted her new acquaintance to observe:

"Well, as I tell you, I myself like the look of you; indeed, I don't see how anybody could help liking the look of you. But looks aren't everything, and you may depend upon it that, whatever that crafty old father of mine may look like, he doesn't mean to give in without a struggle. I know his little ways!"

"Lord Middlewood does not look to me like a deceitful person," said Marietta.

"He isn't a bit deceitful. He has been asked to consent to Lionel's marriage, and he says he can't consent yet awhile; that's straight enough, surely! Only he isn't such a goose as to forbid at once a thing which he has no power to prevent. He will have to put his trust in Providence and diplomacy—especially diplomacy. That is to say that you and Lionel will be given every possible chance and temptation to break your vows. It's rather good of me to tell you this, you know."

"Is it?" said Marietta dubiously.

"Yes; because I am not exactly bound to put you on your guard, and I ought, I suppose, to be more loyal to my people than to betray them. But I'm all in favour of love-matches. Besides, I think you ought to have fair play."

Marietta withdrew her great dreamy eyes from the verdant prospect beyond the window upon which they had been fixed and surveyed her companion curiously.

"You talk more like a man than a woman," she remarked.

"Thanks," answered Betty; "I hope I *am* rather more like a man than a woman. Mr. St. Quintin was kind enough to say the same thing about me."

"St. Quintin?—is not that your brother's friend, who was with him at Ponte a Serraglio? I am sure he had nothing kind to say about me."

"Well, he didn't say anything unkind. Naturally, he thought you rather a nuisance; for he was supposed to be dry-nursing Lionel and I daresay he expected to get into a row. However, he hasn't got into a row; on the contrary, my father has secured a capital berth for him as private secretary to a Cabinet Minister. That will show you that we aren't shabby, as a family."

Marietta was silent for some seconds before she asked: "After all, what is the objection to me?"

"You have a decided foreign accent," answered Betty, laughing.

"Is that all?"

"Oh, no; but one wishes to be polite. Now I'll give you a hint. Don't try to conciliate papa; he is as sharp as a needle, and he doesn't trust anybody very much. As for me, I have almost determined to take your part. You have conciliated me without trying, and that is a pretty good day's work to have accomplished, I can tell you. All the same, you mustn't expect to have a walk over."

"A walk over—what is that?" Marietta inquired.

"It's what takes place when there is only one starter. In this race there will be plenty of starters, you may be sure, and most people would be ready to back the field at even money. I think myself that a shade of odds might be risked on the favourite; but perhaps I shouldn't think so if I knew you better. Anyhow, I hope I shall soon know you better."

"I hope so," answered Marietta, to whom the above jargon was quite unintelligible, but who began to perceive that this self-confident child was not a person to be ignored with impunity.

Then her father came in to tell her that it was time to take her leave. Lord Middlewood and Lionel had already been called away, it seemed, by some unspecified engagement.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PROTESTANT HEROINE.

It is a commonplace amongst hunting men and women that the next best thing to consummate skill and knowledge of what is required in order to ride straight to hounds is absolute ignorance. That she possessed the latter qualification may perhaps account for Marietta Vigne's unbroken success in her contest against a wary and experienced antagonist. Despite Miss Betty's

warning, she was not really much afraid of Lord Middlewood, who always treated her with the utmost amiability, nor did she dread the machinations of certain ladies who, as time went on, became openly assiduous in their attentions to Lionel. If she had been jealous, or if she had at all realised what a difficult job she had undertaken, she might have said or done something foolish and thus played into the hands of her adversaries; but she had complete confidence in her lover's fidelity, while her confidence in her own superiority to those who vainly sought to entice him away from her never faltered for a moment.

"I like you to seem perfectly free," she told him on one occasion, when he apologised for attending some entertainment to which she had not been invited. "I know you would throw these people over at once if I asked you, and that is just why I shall never ask you to do anything of the sort."

But indeed there were few entertainments given in the circle of his friends to which she was not bidden. Some invitations he did, no doubt, procure for Colonel and Miss Vigne; but the majority of the cards which littered the drawing-room table in Seymour-street were despatched quite spontaneously. Marietta was beautiful, sang almost like a professional, was out of the common, and was unexceptionally vouched for; nothing more was needed to insure the flinging open of a hundred hospitable doors. And the reception which awaited her within those easily forced portals was of a nature to satisfy her soul. Invariably she found herself the centre of an admiring group; more flattery than she could swallow (and the truth is that she could swallow a fair amount) was lavished upon her; starred and ribboned statesmen bowed down before her; imperturbable youths suffered themselves to be perturbed by the recognition which she granted to or withheld from them—it was the realisation of an extravagant dream.

To be sure, it did not mean very much—not nearly as much as she thought that it meant; and so her

father, who watched his daughter's triumphs from the background, and who could not for the life of him help being a little elated by them, took care to warn her.

"It is because you are a novelty, my dear," he said; "it is because you express yourself in language to which these fine ladies and gentlemen are not accustomed. You are liable to be eclipsed from one moment to another."

"That is the reason for enjoying the sunshine while it lasts," rejoined Marietta sensibly enough.

Meanwhile, it was becoming more and more evident to Lord Middlewood that the chapter of accidents, upon which he had relied, was unlikely to befriend him. The girl had made no mistakes, Lionel had been inveigled into no flirtations, and time was passing swiftly away. He had a last card up his sleeve, which he proceeded to play, with a sigh. The presence of his venerable mother under his roof was never a source of unmixed gratification to him; but he perceived that she must now be sent for, and he sent for her.

In obedience to this summons, Lady Maria, who for many years past had abjured the pomps and vanities of social London, appeared upon the scene, duly equipped with controversial works and fortified by precise instructions from the Reverend Mr. Grace.

"Send the girl to me," said she; "I ask nothing more. I flatter myself I shall be able to convince her in less than an hour that a Papist has not even the right to be called a Christian."

"Oh—but that isn't quite what we want to prove, is it?" objected Lord Middlewood. "We should look rather foolish if such a conviction were brought home to her and if she acted upon it."

"Well, well!" returned the old lady impatiently, "I dare say she will be obstinate. I shall not leave her a leg to stand upon; but these people never admit that they are worsted in an argument. The astonishing thing to my mind is that a man of the world like you

and a woman of the world like Clara Gosport should have been giving every possible assistance to an adventuress all this time. What does Betty say?"

"Betty, I am sorry to tell you, has gone over to the enemy, horse, foot and artillery. She says Miss Vigne will make as good a sister-in-law as another and a better than most."

"She is an impertinent brat!"

"She is; and for that very reason I deplore her desertion of us. Betty is capable of making my life a burden to me."

"You ought to be ashamed of confessing to such cowardice!" returned Lady Maria severely. "To me, at all events, Betty will not be allowed to express any opinion about the matter."

"Won't she indeed? Well, I only trust that Miss Vigne will be allowed to express opinions which a Protestant family cannot countenance."

A few days after this Lord Middlewood was walking slowly homewards from the House of Lords, where he had been present at a debate and had assisted in throwing out an obnoxious Bill. It was not often that he cared to exercise his privileges as an hereditary legislator, nor had his vote been required on this particular occasion; but he had been glad of an excuse for absenting himself during the interview which, he knew, had been appointed to take place that afternoon between his mother and Miss Vigne. A humane man may be permitted to dislike witnessing the discomfiture of persons whom it is indispensable to put to confusion: also an honest man may sometimes be driven to employ methods of which he does not in his heart altogether approve. But when he reached Arlington Street, and when—after ascertaining that Miss Vigne had left the house some time ago—he went up stairs to the little sitting-room which had been appropriated to Lady Maria's use, it was borne in upon him that he had taken himself to task somewhat prematurely.

"That girl is a true Christian!" was the announcement which fell upon his astonished ear."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Lord Middlewood. "I hope that doesn't mean that she is not a Roman."

"Well, I hope it means that she will not be a Roman long. She has been baptised into the Roman Church and educated in Romish errors; but that, as she very truly says, is not her fault, poor thing, and I found her quite disposed to accept and profess the truth. From what she tells me, her father, I fear, is not in any sense a religious man; still we ought, perhaps, to be thankful that he is not, since his indifference will make him unlikely to raise difficulties."

"But, good heavens! we *want* him to raise difficulties, don't we? Am I to understand that you are in favour of an engagement which you came to London for the express purpose of defeating?"

"My dear Middlewood," answered Lady Maria, gravely and sadly, "I wish it were possible to make you understand that there are more important objects to be striven for here below than mere marrying and giving in marriage. A great privilege and a great opportunity have been granted to me; I may, and I believe I shall, be the humble instrument of snatching one brand from the burning. Can I at such a time pause to consider side issues?"

"Good Lord! do you call Lionel's future a side issue? By all means, induce the girl, if you can, to become an Anglican or a Nonconformist or anything else you like; but don't propose to receive her into the family with open arms because she is in such an indecent hurry to recant! At any rate, you would be willing, I suppose, to welcome a converted barmaid."

"Oh, well, she isn't a barmaid, you know," said Lady Maria, in an altered tone. "She is extremely pretty—why didn't you tell me how pretty she is?—and she talks like a gentlewoman. I really don't see why she shouldn't do. If it comes to that, my poor

dear Halsted was not precisely a scion of the aristocracy."

"He was what he was; but he had one of those fortunes which cover a multitude of sins, whereas Miss Vigne has no fortune except her face. But I know only too well what the meaning of all this is: you have been got at by Betty."

"No such thing!" returned Lady Maria, with a warmth which lent confirmation to her son's surmise. "It so happens that I do agree with Betty in liking and thinking well of the girl; but that is neither here nor there. For the present I see my duty plainly marked out for me, and you must not ask me to turn aside from it in order to further your temporal ambitions."

Lord Middlewood groaned. He thought to himself that his mother was easily humbugged; but there would have been little use in giving utterance to his thoughts. Besides, the discovery was not a novel one. "This is the sort of thing which shakes one's faith in the existence of an overruling Providence," was the only remark that he made. It may possibly have been noticed before now by very acute observers of human nature that faith in the existence of an overruling Providence is apt to be the result of the faithful one's having obtained rather more than he or she had expected. Marietta Vigne had scarcely expected to storm the citadel of Lady Maria Halsted's prejudices with a rush, and that, no doubt, was why she was even now confiding to her lover that she believed Heaven to be on their side.

"My father," she added, "always says that Christianity is not a question of creeds, and that, so long as we try to do our duty it cannot matter whether we belong to this Church or that."

Colonel Vigne was not present to acknowledge or repudiate the liberal views imputed to him. He had gone out for a walk, as his habit was at that hour of the day, and Lionel had the little drawing room in Seymour-street and his betrothed all to himself. His rejoinder

was that of a man who, without holding any exclusive religious opinions, was nevertheless bound by clear and strict ideas respecting honour and honesty.

"I shouldn't like you to change your religion in order to please my grandmother," said he. "Even if our marriage depended upon her goodwill—which of course it doesn't—that would be rather too great a concession to make."

"But we *are* dependent upon her!" Marietta declared. "At any rate, I can see that it is in her power to bring about endless delays and difficulties. And why should there be anything unnatural in my being ready to conform to my husband's religion? I thought you would be glad."

He hastened to assure her that he was glad. In truth, notwithstanding his reliance upon himself and his determination to insist upon the rights that belonged to him, he was alive to the desirability of conciliating his family, and he was aware that his father would not long be able to hold out against the combined pressure of Betty and Lady Maria.

"I hope we should not have allowed either the Pope or grandmother to come between us in any case," he remarked; "still there's no denying that complications will be avoided by your joining the Church of England."

"*Paris vaut bien une messe*," she returned, laughing.

The quotation jarred upon him a little; but he was in love to the happy extent of believing that the object of his adoration could do no wrong. Moreover, he was eager to terminate a provisional state of things which had become irksome to him in more ways than one, and which had from the first seemed to him to be superfluous.

"Our respective parents ought soon to show themselves tractable now," he remarked in a satisfied tone, before changing the subject to one of even more immediate personal interest.

Thus, without let or hindrance (for Colonel Vigne could not see his way to interfere), the conversion of Marietta was speedily accomplished, and the Reverend Mr. Grace returned thanks where, in his opinion, thanks were due. Lord Middlewood, on the other hand, if not thankful, perceived that it behoved him to display resignation. He summoned his son and heir, one afternoon, and said:

"Well, Lionel, the date which you kindly allowed me to fix is at hand. I have done the best I could for you; but it is evident that I have ignominiously failed. Under all the circumstances, I had better, I suppose, ask you to accept my blessing."

"Thank you," answered Lionel, smiling; "but why should you look so sorrowful about it? When all is said, I am not going to make a misalliance."

"That depends entirely upon the meaning which may be attached to the term. Using it in its ordinary sense, one ventures to think that you are entitled to look a little higher; but we will waive that point, if you like. My objection to Miss Vigne—supposing that any objections of mine were likely to count—would be that she is undesirable in respect of qualities which have nothing to do with her social standing."

"I am sorry to hear you say so," returned Lionel, looking grave and somewhat combative. "I doubt whether you would find many people to agree with you. What qualities do you allude to?"

"Do you really wish me to tell you? I shall make you angry if I do."

"That may be; but I should like to hear why you disapprove of her all the same."

"Well—she is a silly woman."

"Silly!"

"I can't find any other adjective that fits. She is ambitious in an aimless sort of way, she is greedy of admiration, and she has not been broken to harness, like the average young Englishwoman of your own class."

"Like Betty, for instance?"

"Betty, I grant you, is an exceptional specimen. But then she is a person of very decided character, and she knows what she wants."

"And does not Marietta?"

"Most assuredly not. For the moment, of course, she wants to marry you, which is scarcely surprising; but by this time next year she may be wishing to Heaven that she had married somebody else. In short, she is an unknown quantity—unknown to herself and everybody else, but more especially to you, who have simply gone crazy about her because she has a pretty face."

This was sufficiently true to be irritating. "Really," exclaimed Lionel, "I can't make out what you are driving at. If she is an unknown quantity, how do you know that she is silly and ambitious and all the rest of it? For the matter of that, every girl might be called an unknown quantity, I suppose—and every young man too."

"Oh, I don't pretend to any certainty as to how you will behave; most of us become what we are made by circumstances. Only I have had the advantage of watching your career so far rather more closely than you have noticed, so that I believe that I could draw you in outline. You have the defects corresponding to your virtues, which may be summed up as pluck, generosity, and scrupulous veracity. You are not wanting in intelligence; but you are unobservant, easy-going, and a poor judge of human nature. Such people are more likely to be sinned against than sinning. For choice, one would rather that you were not sinned against, that's all."

Lionel flushed a little. His intelligence was equal to the comprehension of what it was that his father foresaw, and the complimentary estimate of himself by which the warning had been accompanied did not render it the less offensive to him.

"In a few years' time," he replied gravely, "you will admit, I hope, that I am at least in no danger of being sinned against by my wife."

"My dear fellow, I shall not be here. During the last month I have seen three eminent doctors, and although they have favoured me with three interestingly distinct opinions upon my case, they are of one mind in advising me to set my affairs in order. Consequently, so far as I am concerned, nothing matters very much. As I began by saying, I have done what I could for you, and failed. I have now—at your request, remember—given you my opinion of the lady whom you propose to marry, without converting you to my way of thinking. It only remains for us to shake hands, hope for the best, and dismiss the subject."

It was Lord Middlewood's custom to speak of himself as moribund, and his son was not quite in a good enough humour to meet him with the contradiction which may have been tacitly requested. As for shaking hands and dismissing the subject, that was a request with which it was not difficult to comply. All that could be profitably said upon the subject seemed to have been said.

In the course of the ensuing day everybody (the few hundred ladies and gentlemen who took an interest in the matter being collectively known as everybody) had learnt that Lionel Mallet was going to marry a nobody. Everybody of course said it was a great pity, and some matrons, no doubt, secretly gnashed their teeth; but that did not prevent Miss Vigne from being the recipient of many amiable congratulations. Kings and queens, it is said, are precluded by their position from ever hearing the truth; perhaps very wealthy people, who are sure to entertain a good deal, labour under a somewhat similar disability. At any rate, Marietta was made to feel that she had won a vast number of friends in a singularly short space of time, while the only friend who spoke in language of dissatisfaction to Lionel was the deplorably honest private secretary of a certain powerful Cabinet Minister.

"I take it as a great compliment that you should ask me to be your best man, old fellow," said St. Quintin;

"but I must confess that I wish you were not likely to be in want of a best man quite so soon."

"Well, I have waited as long as I was begged to wait, haven't I?" returned Lionel.

"Yes; only, considering Colonel Vigne's attitude, your father might have managed to make you wait rather longer, I should have thought. The fact appears to be that he is ruled by your sister. I was talking it over with your sister yesterday, and I told her that she was really responsible for this—which is a little ridiculous, you know, seeing that she isn't out of the schoolroom yet."

"I hope, for your sake," said Lionel, laughing, "that you didn't remind her of that."

"I did though, and she took it very well."

"Then she must resemble me, for you'll allow that I am taking your unpleasant remarks very well. Have you any more of them to make?"

"No," answered St. Quintin meditatively, "I don't think so. There are one or two more that I might make if I chose; but what would be the good? Henceforth I shall hold my peace—unless somebody sees fit to attack you or your future wife in my presence."

CHAPTER X.

MARIETTA AT HOME.

One misty, chilly afternoon in autumn, a lady whose person and costume were alike fitted to command the admiration of the most fastidious critic was toasting her toes before a blazing wood fire in a room which contained no critics to admire her. However, she did not mind that; for plenty of respectful admirers who had gone out shooting would be back shortly, and in the

meantime she was very well pleased with her own company and with the retrospective musings which had brought a smile of contentment to her lips.

The beautiful Mrs. Mallet would indeed have been hard to please had she been otherwise than contented with her lot. From the day of her marriage in London up to that on which we renew acquaintance with her in the boudoir at Ludworth, which had been furnished in obedience to her own choice and orders, the record of the past few months had been one of unbroken success for her. The summer had been spent partly in the charming home which had the good fortune to realise her ideal of what a house ought to be, partly in visits to relations and friends of her husband's, all of whom had received her in the kindest possible manner. She was well aware, that at the outset she had had a certain amount of prejudice to overcome and equally well aware of having triumphed over it; she was not yet weary of the delight of disbursing pocket-money profusely, nor had the pleasure of being recognised as a great lady by numerous humbler folk began to pall upon her. As for Lionel, his conduct had been perfect; any half-acknowledged doubts which may at one time have found their way into her mind as to whether she would have wished to pass her life with him if he had not been what he was had now been happily dismissed; she was as much enamoured of him as she was of her actual position—and that was saying a great deal.

Looking back upon the brief history of her married life, she could recall nothing to regret and scarcely an incident which had not been thoroughly enjoyable. A slight, very slight, passage of arms with Lady Maria Halsted, who had made an early bid for dictatorship and failed, could hardly be accounted a subject for regret, since it had been obvious from the first that the Evangelical contingent would have to be reckoned with sooner or later, and it had been Lionel's wish, not less than her own, to decline the admonitions of the Reverend Mr. Grace and his brethren. Lord Middlewood,

who had until recently been nursing his various ailments at a German spa, had given no trouble at all; Betty, who was even now staying at Ludworth as one of a large house-party, remained friendly and affectionate; finally, Colonel Vigne, back in Vienna amongst the cronies of former years, had been satisfactorily disposed of.

It was then she thought of her father that a faint touch of compunction marred the serenity of Marietta's musings; for she could not help acknowledging that the marriage which he had done so little to promote had neither brought additional happiness into his life nor additional money into his ill-furnished purse. Not that she was to blame for that; she could do no more than second the very generous offers which Lionel had made, and to which the Colonel had refused to listen. Still the fact remained that the old man had been dismissed —or rather had dismissed himself—to end his days in solitude, and what caused her a passing pang was the consciousness that it had been rather a relief to her to think of him, as aforesaid, in the light of a person satisfactorily disposed of. Her father, to tell the truth, had been a little provoking, with his persistent and quite unnecessary allusions to the humility of their origin and his absolute refusal to make overtures to the Magliacci family—a step which, under all the circumstances, might surely have been ventured upon. However, he was gone, and his letters, though cheerful, were rather pathetic; and sometimes she felt as if she had not treated him too well.

To give another turn to her reflections, and also to discover, if possible, the cause of shouts of laughter which had been indistinctly borne to her ears at intervals during the last quarter of an hour, she rose and walked to the window. In the park, beyond the flower-garden and the sunk fence, Betty could be seen, standing up in a little two-wheeled cart, to which a recalcitrant donkey had been harnessed. That wilful animal was apparently offering a successful resistance to the

efforts that were being made to break him in. With rigid forelegs and ears laid back, he seemed to be in a fair way to kick himself free of everything, and the descending lash of his charioteer had evidently no terrors for his thick hide. Presently he changed his tactics, flung himself into his collar, and started off into a lumbering gallop, Betty losing her balance and subsiding ignominiously into a sitting posture, while another loud guffaw hailed her discomfiture. Marietta went away to put on her hat and jacket, and emerged from the house just in time to witness the overthrow of her sister-in-law, and the defeat of science by brute force. A tall young man in knickerbocker breeches and leather leggings was disengaging the donkey from the ruins of the cart when his hostess advanced across the wet grass and made him jump round by saying rather coldly:

"Oh, it was you who have been making all that noise, then, Mr. St. Quintin? I heard you from the house; but I couldn't see you, and——"

"And you thought you were listening to the donkey," interpolated Betty. "A very natural mistake, I'm sure. Wait a bit, though! I'll make both the donkey and Mr. St. Quintin laugh on the wrong side of their mouths before I've done with them. That beast," she continued, pointing to the author of her mishap, who was placidly cropping the turf, "is being educated by me to draw granny's bath-chair, and educated he shall be, if I have to smash up a dozen of Lionel's carts before I bring him to reason. He wouldn't have been half so troublesome this afternoon, only he was backed up and encouraged by the unmannerly yells which disturbed you. This comes of being interrupted in one's work by people who ought to be out shooting. Take him away, Marietta, like a good creature, and perhaps one of you will just let the gardener know that a wheel has unfortunately come off the cart he lent me. I must see what I can do with the reins and the whip alone."

She and the donkey were off in a trice, and soon disappeared in the misty twilight, pursued by St. Quintin's warning cry of "Mind his heels!"

"I thought you had gone out with the others," said Marietta, speaking in the constrained tone which she was apt to adopt when addressing a man whom she had never been able to like, and who, she was convinced, did not like her.

"I was shooting so badly that I left them soon after luncheon," answered St. Quintin. "For the last hour I have been watching Miss Mallet, which has really been as good as a play."

He laughed under his breath at the recollection, thereby, for some occult reason, irritating his companion, who remarked:

"And you preferred watching Betty to helping her, I suppose?"

"Oh, she wouldn't have allowed me to help her," St. Quintin replied. "Besides, I am not at all sure that I could have been of any use to her. She knows better than I do what she is about."

"Really! You don't often give people credit for being so wise as that, do you?"

St. Quintin looked surprised and distressed. He was unconscious of having done anything to deserve the snubs which his friend's wife so frequently inflicted upon him; but he had hitherto deemed it best to take no notice of them. Now, however, he ventured to ask:

"What do you mean?"

"Only that you are rather fond of giving advice, are you not? I dare say it is very good advice. Lionel says it is; and he ought to know, if anybody does."

It is not always easy to bear in mind the transformation which matrimony necessarily effects in the friends of bachelor years. St. Quintin knew by hearsay that newly-married men are in the habit of confiding everything to their wives; but perhaps he had forgotten this in talking to Lionel, who had seemed to be so little altered, and to whom he was penitently aware of having

offered sage counsel which might have seemed a trifle priggish on repetition.

"I'm afraid you think me a meddlesome sort of fellow," said he. "I suppose I *do* appear meddlesome—though the honest truth is that I have only spoken when I was consulted."

Viewed in the light of a would-be conciliatory speech, this was scarcely happy. It was just because St. Quintin had been consulted about so many matters which were no business of his that Marietta had a bone to pick with him.

"Lionel is wonderfully good-natured," she remarked; "he is always willing to listen to anybody's opinion. Still it seems to me that, if I were in his place, I should consider myself old enough to know my own mind."

"So he does," St. Quintin declared. "Men who know their own minds are the very men who don't object to hearing what other people may have to say. But as far as this question of his going into Parliament is concerned, there can't very well be two opinions, and what I think is what all his friends must think. Surely you are not against his profiting by such an opportunity!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Marietta; "I had not heard that there was any question of his going into Parliament."

Well, if she had not been told, that was, no doubt, a legitimate grievance; but St. Quintin made haste to explain that negotiations had only that morning assumed a definite form.

"As you did not come down to breakfast, Lionel could not show you his letters, and very likely he may have felt some scruple about mentioning preliminaries which he had been asked to treat as confidential. As for me, I was instructed to sound him by my chief, which accounts for my having been in the secret. But there is no further need for secrecy now. He has been formally invited to stand for the seat which Mr. Mitchell is resigning on account of bad health, and as a large proportion of the electors are either his own tenants or

Lord Middlewood's, he will probably be returned unopposed."

The tempestuous reappearance of Betty and the donkey, both of whom exhibited symptoms of distress, relieved Marietta from the necessity of making any rejoinder. Her ideas of what might be implied by a seat in the House of Commons were of the haziest order, and she would have had nothing to urge for or against the contemplated step, had she been informed of it; but this fresh proof of St. Quintin's influence over her husband was rather mortifying.

"Mark my words," said Betty, as soon as she had recovered her breath; "that moke will have been brought to his senses in another twenty-four hours, and by the end of the week I shall be able to warrant him fit for the use of the most nervous old lady. He knows now what happens when I have a donkey that won't go!"

"I shall make it my business," St. Quintin declared, "to place myself in communication with the local representative of the S. P. C. A."

"You had better! And how about that wounded partridge this morning, eh? Now I'll tell you what I wish you would do. Just harness him to the remains of the cart, and we'll ask him whether he minds helping us home with it."

Betty and St. Quintin moved away together, and Marietta walked on towards the house, which she reached simultaneously with the returning sportsmen. These were accompanied by several of her lady guests, who had gone out to meet them, and everybody wanted tea. So it was not until two hours later, when she had finished dressing for dinner, that she was able to snatch a few hurried moments in private with her husband.

"Why did you never tell me that you were going to be a deputy?" she began.

Lionel was searching high and low for the sleeve-links which his valet, who had left the room on Mrs. Mallet's entrance, had deposited in some improbable

place. "What did you say that I was going to be?" he asked, in a pre-occupied voice. "Oh! an M. P. you mean. Well, they haven't elected me yet; but I suppose I shall be returned. I'm not sure that it isn't rather a bore; still, it's one's manifest duty. So St. Quintin tells me, anyhow."

"Must you always be guided by Mr. St. Quintin? Am I so utterly unimportant that I am not even to hear of what you mean to do until everything is settled?"

Lionel lifted an astonished countenance towards his wife's aggrieved one. "Will you mind having to be half the year in London?" he asked. "I thought you would prefer it."

"I mind nothing, except your keeping secrets from me," she replied. "I think that is rather unkind and rather humiliating. I could see that that man exulted over me this afternoon when I was obliged to confess that you had not said a word to me about your plans."

Lionel made an instant and full apology. He had been under the impression, he said, that she took no particular interest in politics, but she might be certain that he would never willingly conceal anything from her in which she would be likely to be interested. "Of course there are heaps of things—matters of business and so forth—which it doesn't occur to one to mention to—to—" he was going to say "to women," but substituted, "to those who are not directly connected with them."

"Is Mr. St. Quintin directly connected with this matter?"

"Well, yes; one may say that he is, for he brought me a very civil message from the Home Secretary. By the way, you must have been quite mistaken in imagining that he exulted over you. I notice that you dislike St. Quintin, Marietta, and I am sorry for it; because he is one of the best fellows in the world. You will think so when you know him better."

"I know that he did all he could to prevent our

marriage," she returned. "If I dislike him—and I do—it is chiefly because he dislikes me."

Lionel's protest had not the ring of complete conviction. Both he and his friend were honest men; consequently, the sentiments of the one could not be wholly unsuspected by the other; although, of course, they had been carefully suppressed.

"I am not jealous," resumed Marietta; "I don't think anybody could call me that. But you must not expect me to be delighted when I find that you are so much more influenced by some one else than you are by me."

This was the first approach to a difference that had taken place between the young people. It was prevented from reaching the proportions of a quarrel partly by the convincing, if rather illogical, measures to which Lionel, who was still a lover, had prompt recourse, partly by the more prosaic circumstances that the dinner gong had sounded some five minutes before, and that their guests were presumably waiting for them.

But, lover though he was, Lionel Mallet did not happen to be of an uxorious temperament. It was certain that in the more serious crises of existence he would not allow himself to be dictated to by his wife—would not even so much as understand her wishing to dictate to him; and, that being so, there were some obvious danger of an ultimate collision between him and a lady who believed herself born to command. On the way down stairs he was ill-advised enough to say: "Marietta, dear, you'll be pleasant to St. Quintin, won't you? I particularly want you to be pleasant to him."

She nodded; and in the course of the evening she contrived to make herself so pleasant to her husband's friend that that well-meaning gentleman inwardly resolved to cut his visit short and be summoned away on the morrow.

CHAPTER XI.

ROLAND STRAHAN.

To the Englishman of noble or gentle birth and sufficient fortune nothing is apt to seem quite so important in life as sports and pastimes. These, indeed, may almost be said to constitute the chief business, as they certainly constitute the chief pleasure, of his existence; from earliest childhood he is initiated into the science, the rules and the discipline of them; they form his character, determine his habit of mind, and make him what he is. He might, as most unprejudiced persons will agree, be a very much worse fellow; some may even doubt whether a different system of education could have produced a much better fellow. Such as he is, he has ruled our national destinies for generations, with results of which we have no great need to be ashamed; and now that the advance of democracy is rapidly taking power out of his hands, it does not seem altogether certain that his successors will prove his superiors. An alien critic, to be sure, may plausibly maintain that politics are rather too serious a matter to be treated as a mere game; but perhaps alien critics do not realise that it is possible to make games serious enough for anything.

Lionel Mallet embarked upon the political career which was destined to interest him more than hunting, shooting, racing, or cricket, with no very great enthusiasm, yet with the determination which might have been expected of him to learn accepted rules and conditions and to "play the game" in a thoroughly sportsmanlike spirit. A Conservative by inheritance, and subsequently by conviction, he was nevertheless willing to make such allowances as might be possible for the point of view of his opponents, and that, no doubt, accounts in some measure for his being at the present time of writing one of the most universally

popular of public men. But when he was returned to Parliament, unopposed, for the division in which his own estates and his father's lay, he had little idea of ever playing a prominent part in public affairs. It had been represented to him that it would be a dereliction of duty on his part to refuse to come forward, and he had acknowledged the justice of the assertion. Personally, he did not fancy the prospect of residing in London from January till August, nor did he think that it would be very good fun to listen for hours at a stretch to long-winded orations upon subjects as to which his mind was already made up; but if the thing was to be done at all, it behoved him, he considered, to put his back into it; so he surrendered his leisure to a course of study and a sedulous attendance at provincial meetings whence, in due course of time, he reaped his reward.

Thus the early spring found him and his wife established in Arlington-street, the family mansion having been placed at their disposal by Lord Middlewood, who had himself no intention of occupying it. Lionel in those days was a happy man, and Marietta, so far as he could judge, was a very happy woman. Certainly she had every reason to be happy, for she was blessed with health, wealth and beauty, while the social success which had never ceased to smile upon her since her first landing on the shores of England had become wider and more pronounced during the weeks which had followed the reassembling of Parliament. Yet she had moments, not to say hours, of discontent—moments and hours when she felt as if all this prosperity and glory had been gained by rather too slight an effort; that it was scarcely personal enough to be wholly satisfactory; that the tribute was paid not so much to herself as to the station conferred upon her by her marriage; and that she would have enjoyed her conquests far more had they been won as a renowned *cantatrice* than as the wife of the Honourable Lionel Mallet, M. P. Consequently, she had occasional fits of what a less amiable man than her husband

might have called nasty temper, and at such times she was extremely hard to please. She indulged in disparaging criticisms upon his friends—a thing which always vexed him; she yawned over his descriptions of the debates; she even affected, every now and again, to be jealous; though that was not an easy pretence to keep up, since it was obvious that he had eyes for no woman but her. However, he was so seldom at home during the day, and they had so many evening engagements, that there was little time or opportunity for domestic squabbles.

One afternoon Marietta, who had been driving in the Park, was seated beside one of the open windows of the drawing-room, through which the scent of the hyacinths and lilies of the valley which had been banked up outside it was wafted to her by a soft westerly breeze, when Mr. St. Quintin was announced. It was not very often that she was favoured with a call from St. Quintin, although he was often enough in the house, and the intruder lost no time in apologising for his intrusion.

"I thought I should find Mallet at home," he explained; "I wanted rather particularly to see him. But they tell me he is sure to be in soon."

"If they tell you so, no doubt it is so," answered Marietta, smiling. "I never can remember myself on which afternoons of the week the House of Commons is supposed to be able to get on without him. Won't you sit down and have a cup of tea with me in the meantime?"

She was not much more fond of St. Quintin than she had been in former days; but she had reached the conclusion that he was unimportant. It was not worth while, she thought, to be rude to the man, nor would any amount of rudeness on her part put a stop to the intimacy which existed between him and her husband.

"Have you come to offer Lionel a post in the Ministry?" she inquired, after her visitor had rung the bell, at her request, and a couple of servants had responded with a tea-table and a tea-tray.

"Oh, not yet," answered St. Quintin, quite seriously; "that would be unprecedented, I should think, in the case of a man who has never opened his lips in the House. But he has done some good work outside the House, and there is one subject which he is believed to have mastered. We hope he may be willing to make his maiden speech about it. Then, if he speaks well, he will have taken a long step towards office."

"Really? I don't understand much about these matters; but from what people say, it seems to me that he will only be able to keep out of office by being extraordinarily stupid. Isn't he as inevitably born to become a Minister as he is to become a peer some day?"

"Certainly not," St. Quintin replied. "It is true that he starts in the race favourably handicapped; but that doesn't mean that he has no formidable competitors. You don't," he added, "seem to be very ambitious for him."

"Is he so very ambitious for himself? Don't you think he would much rather win the Derby with one of those long-legged foals whom he is always examining so anxiously down at Ludworth than be Prime Minister of England?"

Lionel walked into the room before any answer could be returned, and the question was at once referred to him by St. Quintin.

He laughed and said that he had no chance of ever being Prime Minister, whereas it was always within the limits of possibility that he, or anybody else who kept a small racing stud, might own the best horse of the year.

"But you would rather, for choice, win the Derby than be a great political personage," persisted Marietta; "and I think you are quite right. What pleasure is there in holding one's mouth open for the fruit to drop into it? What one wants is to accomplish something which other people, with the same advantages, can't accomplish."

Lionel was not quite sure that that was what he,

personally, wanted; but he agreed that a man who had contrived to force his way to the front by means of his own exertions and abilities had more to be proud of than one for whom the path to distinction lay open and plain.

"And that reminds me," he continued, "that I met a man just now who has neither fortune nor interest at his back, but who will be a big man one of these days, unless I am very much mistaken. You know, I always told you, St. Quintin, that Strahan was bound to make himself heard of in the world."

St. Quintin's grimace expressed neither pleasure nor approval. "Is that fellow back in England already?" he asked. "I thought he had gone out to Australia to make himself heard of there."

"Well, I gather from what he says that the shortest road to distinction out there leads round by London. Anyhow, he has thought it worth while to undertake the voyage and try what can be done with home authorities and financiers towards pushing the fortunes of his colony."

"Oh, I see—gold mines."

"Very likely. He didn't go much into details; but he seems to be convinced that the colony has a great future before it. I asked him to come and dine on Sunday; so you'll meet him then and hear what he has to say."

Marietta pushed back her chair to bring it alongside of the writing-table on which her engagement-book lay. "I hope your friend is not superstitious," she remarked; "for if he dines here on Sunday we shall sit down thirteen."

Lionel thought there would be no difficulty about securing a fourteenth guest; but St. Quintin at once begged that he might be allowed to cede his place to the returned colonist. "I shall really be glad of a quiet evening," he said; "I have such a heap of work to get through just now. Besides, as you know, I never was one of Strahan's admirers. I trust he won't induce

you to finance some rotten company or other for him; he'll get very little change out of Mr. Sitwell, I'm sure."

Mr. Sitwell, who was at that time Secretary of State for the Colonies, had the reputation of being a shrewd and hard-headed functionary.

"I don't know about that," answered Lionel, laughing; "all I can tell you is that he was talking with Sitwell on the steps of the Carlton when I met him."

St. Quintin raised his eyebrows. "That's pretty well for a man who holds no credentials—I suppose he can hardly be armed with credentials yet. Still, anything that can be accomplished by means of impudence he will accomplish, no doubt."

"And ability. I think you must allow him some credit for ability."

"Well, ability of a certain kind, if you insist upon it; but I prefer the kind of ability which goes with honesty, like yours, Mallet—and so do more important persons than I. That reminds me that I was sent to say a word or two to you about——"

He dropped his voice, as he led his friend away to the other end of the long room, which they both presently quitted, conversing while they went. Marietta made no effort to detain them, nor had she any curiosity as to the subject which apparently interested them so much. On the other hand, she did feel some passing curiosity with regard to the unknown Strahan, whom she surmised to be a clever adventurer. It seemed not improbable that the man might amuse her; in any case, he would be more amusing, she hoped, than Mr. St. Quintin, whose dislike for him predisposed her in his favour.

The world at large had rather more valid reasons than that for being predisposed in favour of Roland Strahan. At Oxford, where he had taken high honours, he had been decidedly and deservedly popular with a numerous acquaintance, although he could not be said to have any very intimate friends. There was some-

thing about him, despite his pleasant manners and the ease with which he adapted himself to his company, which seemed to discourage intimacy: perhaps it was a certain suggestion of reserve on his part; perhaps (as Lionel Mallet, who knew him better than anybody, averred) it was the sense which nine men out of every ten who were brought into contact with him experienced, that they were in the presence of their intellectual superior. However that may have been, he had been liked by undergraduates, and was pretty sure of being liked by men of action all the world over, seeing that he could ride, shoot, row, and, if necessary, fight with the best of them.

Amongst the ten invited guests to whom Mrs. Mallet extended a gracious welcome on the ensuing Sunday evening, this wiry, alert little man, with the keen, gray eyes, the low, broad forehead, and the square jaws, speedily established a claim to pre-eminence in her opinion. In anticipation of his doing so, she had so far defied the laws of precedence as to arrange that he should sit on her right hand, and he rewarded her by proving himself a highly entertaining neighbour.

"Of course, if one could chose, one would prefer an English to a Colonial career," he wound up a graphic account of some of his Australian experiences by saying, "but the main thing is to have a possibility of a career somewhere—to feel that one has as good a chance of coming to the front as anybody else. In this country the chances aren't equal—which may be just as well for the country, but is a little discouraging to the individual."

"Only the greater the difficulties, the greater the triumph," remarked Marietta.

"Yes; but the slower in coming. One would fain achieve one's little triumphs while one is still young enough to enjoy them, and that is why the best years of my life will probably be spent at the Antipodes."

"What a pity that seems!" exclaimed Marietta, half-involuntarily.

He laughed and asked why she considered it a pity, to which she replied that everybody must consider it so. "There are such crowds of eminent noblemen and gentlemen who might sail for Australia to-morrow, and it would not matter in the least if they never returned!"

"So you really think that I am one of those whose absence is likely to be felt as a loss by their native country? A few more such speeches, Mrs. Mallet, and you will make me so intolerably vain that no country will consent to harbour me. My friends assure me that I have quite a sufficiently high opinion of myself as it is."

He was perhaps justified in entertaining a pretty good opinion of himself; for, young though he was, he had already accomplished much, with nothing but his own bright wits and energy to back him, and he was on the high road towards accomplishing far more. To Marietta he appeared to be self-reliant rather than conceited, and his smiling, frankly interrogative gaze encouraged her to pay him that additional compliment.

"Thank you," he returned; "I suppose I am self-reliant—it would be a bad job for me if I were not!"

"Don't you think it is rather a bad job for anybody to be provided with other people and things to rely upon? There is my husband, for instance, who could hardly manage to be a failure if he tried."

"Dear me! does he complain of that?"

"Not that I know of; but——"

"But you do, perhaps?"

"Sometimes it seems to me a little dull to be always on the winning side. To be absolutely certain of perpetual happiness would be only a shade better than being certain of perpetual misery, I think. How can people really want to go to heaven?"

"I have never yet," answered Mr. Strahan, "encountered man or woman who was in the slightest hurry to go there; but what lends attractiveness to the prospect is precisely its uncertainty, you see. After

all, Mallet isn't sure of ever being Premier, or even a Cabinet Minister; so one understands his cheerful toleration of the House of Commons. Your case is less simple; because Fortune, I am afraid, has left you absolutely nothing to wish for."

She made a grimace and shrugged her shoulders, while he, scrutinising her sharply for a moment, smoothed a nascent smile away from his lips with his napkin. Roland Strahan understood men better than he did women; yet he was not without experience of feminine peculiarities, and he thought he could perceive what was the matter with his beautiful hostess. She had no work to do, she was evidently tired of play, she was not, he felt sure, in love with her husband, and she was in exactly the right condition of mind for falling in love with somebody else. He had, however, no personal inclination to play the part of that possible somebody. His personal inclinations and ambitions were, for the time being, of quite another order, and they would scarcely be served by too assiduous attentions to Lionel Mallet's wife. After dinner, when his friend came and sat down beside him, he said what was at once appreciative and discreet respecting Marietta. Something he perceived that he was expected to say on the occasion of his first introduction to a lady so universally admired, and he contrived to say the right thing, being a man who seldom failed to say the right thing when it was worth his while to do so.

The unlucky circumstance that he did not know one note from another, and that music was a rather disagreeable noise to him, did not deter him from warmly complimenting his hostess upon her rendering of an operatic solo later in the evening; but he knew better than to effect intimate acquaintance with an art which was a sealed book to him.

"I am an ignoramus," he confessed; "all I know is that you sing like nobody whom I have ever heard before. Is it a delusion, or has your voice some very unusual quality?"

She coloured with pleasure, for he had accidentally hit upon the one form of flattery which she loved and coveted. "I believe it is a rather odd sort of voice in some ways," she answered; "once upon a time I used to be told that there was a fortune in it. But that is of no consequence now."

"And you sigh because your fortune is made! May I be permitted to sigh with you because mine is still to make?"

"Certainly not. Didn't I tell you, and didn't you agree with me, that what we all want is excitement, and what we all hate is dull prosperity?"

"I didn't remember that we put the case quite so definitely and concisely as that; but I won't deny that excitement has charms. Nevertheless, I should like to feel a little more sure than I do at present that I haven't come to England upon a fool's errand."

"You will succeed," said Marietta, with conviction. "What is it that you want?"

"Oh, a good deal. Money, credit, sundry political concessions. It will take time; all these things are not to be obtained from one moment to another."

"I am glad of that," said Marietta, graciously; "for I suppose you mean that you will have to remain some months in this country."

He took her hand to wish her good-night, and thanked her for this kindly intimation of a desire on her part that he should prolong his stay. There was —or she fancied there was—a peculiar look of sympathy in his grey eyes as they met hers.

"I hope you will come and see me again, when you are not too busy," she said.

He answered, laughing, that she would probably see only too much of him. "I can't afford to neglect my powerful friends, and Mallet is already a power, you know."

But when the company had dispersed, and her husband asked her how she liked Strahan, she replied indifferently, "Oh, I don't know. Pretty well, I

think; but he is not handsome, and his coat fitted rather badly."

CHAPTER XII.

AUSTRALIA ADVANCES.

MARIETTA'S criticism upon the cut of Mr. Strahan's coat may very likely have been warranted, for he was too busy a man and had too many things to think about to devote much attention to the adornment of his person; but when she stated that he was not, in her opinion, handsome, she was—for some reason probably unknown to herself—a trifle disingenuous. In reality she had conceived a great admiration for the square, clean-shaven face which many another woman had admired before her, and which, if it had not the undeniable beauty possessed, for instance, by Lionel's, was nevertheless as superior to the ordinary, well-bred Anglo-Saxon countenances which had of late surrounded her as its suggestion of strength and bright intelligence could make it.

Many woman had admired Roland Strahan, but it cannot be said that he had admired, save after a passing, slightly disdainful fashion, many women; possibly that was why he had been made the recipient of favours which he had scarcely been at the pains to seek. A lone man, with no near relatives nor any softening reminiscences of childhood, he was singularly independent of sympathy. Life to him presented itself, and always had presented itself, in the light of a prolonged struggle, the prizes of which were reserved for those who concentrated their whole powers upon the business in hand. The love of women, so far as he understood what that meant, he classed among the minor luxuries of existence—a thing to enjoy at leisure

moments, when there were any leisure moments, but certainly not worth all the fuss made about it by poets and romancers. There had been amatory episodes in his past career; but they had been dismissed from his memory as scarcely more important than bygone dinners or cast-off clothes; at the bottom of his heart he had a profound contempt for women, although he was too shrewd to ignore the power which is conferred upon them by the weakness of men, and which renders it occasionally advisable that they should be conciliated. It might be advisable, he thought, to conciliate Mrs. Mallet; but he did not hurry himself about calling upon her, having affairs of more pressing consequence to occupy him.

It was after a morning spent in the fairly successful prosecution of those affairs that he dropped in to lunch at a club which he had joined while still at the University, and which, as it chanced, was daily patronised at that hour by his former fellow-student St. Quintin. The two men, meeting in the doorway, recognised and greeted one another with just so much show of cordiality as the occasion made unavoidable. Friends they were not, nor ever had been; still, since there was no acknowledged breach between them, and since they possessed at least one intimate friend in common, neither could very well help telling the other that he was glad to see him. On Strahan's side, indeed, the assertion had the incidental advantage of being true; for it occurred to him that he might obtain information from St. Quintin upon one or two points of interest. He therefore proposed that they should share a table and "have a talk about old times."

However, it was not about old times that he proceeded to talk when his cutlet and his pint of claret had been brought to him—that subject being, on several accounts, best left alone.

"I was dining with Mallet the other night," he began. "Somebody told me he had made a rather foolish marriage; but really, after seeing Mrs. Mallet, I find

myself unable to admit that. It can't be foolish on the part of a man who can afford to please himself to make such a splendid selection. And her beauty is quite splendid, don't you think so?"

"Yes, there is no exaggeration in calling her beautiful," answered St. Quintin, a little curtly.

"In spite of which, you think he was a fool to marry her, eh?"

"I didn't say so."

"No, but you refrained from asserting the contrary, which you would certainly have done if your conscience had allowed you, for I remember what a staunch friend you always were to Mallet. Is there anything against her? She struck me as being a lady by birth."

"There is nothing against her that I know of," answered St. Quintin, "and I am sure that it would gratify her very much to hear that you consider her a lady."

Strahan laughed. "I apologise," said he; "I was only wondering what your objections to her could be. Who was she?"

"She was a Miss Vigne. Her father is a retired Colonel in the Austrian army, and her mother was a member of the Magliacci family, I believe. That is all I can tell you. Are you staying any time in London?"

"That will have to depend upon all manner of uncertainties; it is business, not pleasure, that has brought me all the way from Australia. So she is related to the Magliacci, is she?—a fine old family. They were willing enough to consent to the match, of course?"

"I don't think their consent was asked. Colonel Vigne gave us to understand that he was not upon speaking terms with his wife's family, and that they had never recognised him as belonging to them. I hope your curiosity is satisfied now."

"Not at all; it is rather stimulated. It isn't such an impertinent curiosity as you imply, though; one has surely the right to make some innocent inquiries

about the wife of an old friend. Besides, I frankly confess that I always endeavour to find out who people are; knowledge of that sort may turn out useful at any moment, or the absence of it very inconvenient. Wasn't it somewhere in Italy that you and Mallet came across this wandering Colonel and his daughter?"

"You seem to know all that there is to know," answered St. Quintin. "As for my objecting to Mrs. Mallet, I only doubted, as I suppose most men in my place would have doubted, whether Lord Middlewood would consider her his son's equal, and whether I was not likely to be blamed for allowing Lionel to engage himself in such haste."

"Well, you couldn't help that, I presume."

"I couldn't help it; but I felt as if I had been to some extent placed in charge for the time being. That is an old story now; the marriage has taken place, with Lord Middlewood's approval; it appears to be a happy one, and even if it were not, that would be no business of mine—nor of yours, if you will excuse my saying so."

"It isn't too polite of you to say so," answered Strahan good-humouredly; "but I'll excuse you, in consideration of the fact that you evidently find it as difficult as ever to treat me with politeness. As a matter of curiosity—more impertinent curiosity, you see! —why do you so heartily dislike a man who has never done you an injury, and who has a perfectly sincere liking and respect for you?"

St. Quintin was not mollified: there was a terrible honesty and straightforwardness about him which no cajolery could vanquish.

"Since you ask me," he replied, "I haven't forgotten that you did your best to drag Mallet into what might have proved a very nasty affair for him."

"About poor Maggie Field's suicide, do you mean? My dear fellow, it was I who was dragged into that affair, and if I mentioned Mallet's name, it was only to show that I was as innocent as he. Many people, I

suspect, would tell you that I was even more innocent than he."

"Many people tell lies."

Strahan drew his brows together and for a moment looked really angry; but he had his temper well under control, and he did not wish to quarrel with St. Quintin, who might easily be of service to him, or the contrary.

"Well," he said, "we won't discuss a business which everybody who was concerned in it must be anxious to forget. Luckily for Mallet and for me, the culprit took to his heels in time to exculpate us both. I'm sorry —or rather, on second thoughts, I'm glad—that you can give no better reason than that for your hostility."

St. Quintin could have given other reasons—possibly even better ones; but he refrained, and responded only with a grunt. Shortly afterwards Strahan glanced at his watch and jumped up, turning round to ask, as he moved away, "Shall I meet you at Lady Helen Sitwell's squash this evening?"

St. Quintin had not been invited to that entertainment; but he took note of the circumstance that Strahan had, and he said to himself: "What cheek the fellow has! I shouldn't wonder if he were to bring off his big robbery, whatever it may be; but I do trust he won't manage to involve Lionel in it."

Nothing would have persuaded St. Quintin that Strahan was not a rascal; but in truth the latter contemplated no robbery. He had, on the contrary, much confidence in the future of the company which he had been commissioned to float, and of which the secretaryship had been promised to him. If he was desirous of including Lionel Mallet's name in the directorate, that was merely because he had been advised that such a name might be worth securing, and because he did not yet know quite as many magnates as he hoped to know ere long. Meanwhile, it was characteristic of him to seek out a certain impoverished Italian violinist of his acquaintance and invite that hungry man to dine at

a restaurant at Soho, where Southern dishes and Southern wines were to be obtained. It was a theory and principle of Strahan's that details should never be neglected, and he thought he might as well find out, if he could, all that there was to be found out respecting Mrs. Mallet's parentage—knowledge of that sort, as he had candidly confessed to St. Quintin, being often of value. So the ex-Garibaldian and veteran conspirator upon whom his hospitality was bestowed was interrogated, and was, as it chanced, able to furnish particulars relating to Marietta's mother and her breach with her family, which were by no means devoid of interest to the inquirer.

"It is an ancient history," the soured, gray-bearded Republican said, "which has been forgotten long ago. It made some stir at the time, I remember, because the Magliacci were great people in those days; but I do not know why they should contrive to bear malice against their white coat now that they are little people, and that the Italy for which we shed our blood has become a bankrupt monarchy, clinging to the skirts of her former oppressors. For my part, I would as soon be an Austrian as a Magliacci, and I would rather be an Englishman than either. You had better not recommend this young lady to make advances to her mother's family. They would be capable of pardoning everything, meeting her half-way, and borrowing money from her husband."

"Oh, I don't know that she is ambitious of cultivating them," answered Strahan. "Probably she is quite satisfied with the family into which she has married; and indeed she would be hard to please if she were not."

He made a mental note of what he had heard—his mental note-book was both copious and heterogeneous—took leave of his informant, and at a later hour had himself driven to Grosvenor-square, where the Colonial Secretary resided. By the be-diamonded lady who stood at the top of the broad staircase, receiving a dense

throng of heated guests, he was accorded one of those vague greetings which are the portion of the unknown; but Mr. Sitwell, new to office, full of energy, and a shrewd judge of men, had a friendly word or two for the clever young Australian to whom he had already granted more than one interview.

"Well, Mr. Strahan, I saw your Agent-General to-day, and he was loud in your praises. The colony is to be congratulated upon counting you amongst its rising public men."

Strahan replied, with becoming modesty, that he could not yet venture to style himself a public man; but the Secretary of State clapped him good-naturedly on the shoulder and returned—

"Oh, you will be a public man as soon as you choose. And you are quite right to begin your career by coming over here and acquainting yourself with our habits and methods of procedure; children ought to know their mother. Now, is there anybody here this evening to whom you would like to be introduced?"

Mr. Sitwell had earned considerable popularity by a *bonhomie* which did not seriously commit him. His assumption that his present interlocutor was an Australian born was not corrected—for Strahan divined that he did not love correction—and his offer of an introduction to certain distinguished colleagues of his was gratefully accepted. There are people who move heaven and earth in vain every year to obtain a foothold in circles which cannot, after all, be called very exclusive, while there are others who step into them without the slightest apparent effort. The latter are considered lucky fellows, and it may be that Strahan's luck was good. But perhaps he was right in ascribing the rapid advantages which he was making to his own determination and capacity.

However that may have been, he was feeling very well pleased with himself and with the world at large by the time that he caught sight of Mrs. Mallet advancing slowly towards him through the crowd, and the fact

of his being in so good a humour helped him, no doubt, to pay her the homage which he might otherwise have neglected. It was, of course, an unspoken homage; but not the less on that account was it discernible in his eyes and the inflection of his voice; so that she easily recognised and was gratified by it. She was looking magnificent, as indeed she always did when in evening costume; she wore the famous Middlewood sapphires and diamonds which had been handed over to her by her widowed father-in-law; it had to be admitted that Mallet was an enviable man, even if his marriage had been in some respects an absurd and imprudent one.

"Why have you not been to see us all this time?" Marietta asked. "You told me that you meant to be perpetually in the house."

"I am a truthful man, Mrs. Mallet," answered Strahan, smiling; "I haven't called upon you because I haven't had time. With me business has to come first and pleasure afterwards. But if you will tell me at what hour of the day your husband is generally to be found at home I may combine the two in the visit to Arlington-street which I am going to pay as soon as I possibly can. Is he here this evening?"

"I don't think so. He was to meet me here on his way from the House and take me home, but I suppose he has been detained. Most likely he has gone straight back; for I said I should not wait for him, and he hates squashes. Do you like them?"

"Well, not for their own sake; but on other grounds I am grateful for having been admitted to this one. You must remember that I am a nobody, who wants to become a sort of a somebody; so that it is well worth my while to be vouched for by Lady Helen Sitwell."

It would have sounded rather more flattering if he had said that he deemed it well worth his while to have secured this opportunity of encountering Mrs. Mallet; but speeches of that nature had latterly lost a good deal of their savour for Marietta by reason of constant repetition. What did flatter her was a certain subtle

suggestion that she was being taken into Mr. Strahan's confidence, which, supplemented by the language of the eyes above alluded to, led her to prolong a conversation which several distinguished acquaintances of hers had already made attempts to interrupt.

"How impossible it is to talk with any comfort while one is being jostled and deafened like this!" she exclaimed impatiently at length. "Will you not escort me home, if you have nothing better to do, and smoke a cigar with Lionel, who is sure to be in his den, studying the Racing Calendar, by this hour of the night?"

He consented willingly; for, in the first place, he was anxious to see Mallet, and in the second, he thought it would be pleasant enough to pursue the intimacy which Marietta seemed to be offering him. These, accurately stated, were the sentiments which he scarcely took the trouble to disguise, and if he had contemplated laying siege to Mrs. Mallet's heart (but he had no such ambition), he could scarcely have drawn his first parallels with greater skill. Presently, when he was seated beside her in her brougham, he remembered to ask why she had not delighted Lady Helen Sitwell's guests by singing to them.

"It was not a musical party," she answered, with a touch of displeasure, "and I don't sing wherever I go. Do you think I hire myself out for the evening, like a Hungarian band?"

"No; but I think you must enjoy doing what you are able to do so admirably. I fancy that what you call 'squashes' are only tolerable to you, as they are to me, for the sake of the opportunities that they give."

"They give you opportunities of gaining something that is really important, perhaps; it isn't in the least important to have a finer voice and to have been better taught than the other women whom I meet. I used to think that it was, and of course it would have been, if I had been differently situated; but now I don't care. I should be applauded just the same if I had no voice at all."

"Ah, that is just what I ventured to tell you the other day; you are in the unhappy position of having nothing left to wish for."

"Nothing that I shall get, at all events," she returned with a sigh.

"I offer you my respectful congratulations upon having still a few unsatisfied desires. Though I cannot imagine what they can be."

Marietta did not enlighten him; probably it was not in her power to do so. But in the course of the short drive she elicited from him the admission that his own unsatisfied desires were not absolutely limited to acquiring a large fortune and becoming a Colonial Premier.

"However, that is about all that I permit myself to hope for when I see the new moon or a piebald horse," he remarked, laughing, as he followed her into the brightly lighted hall in Arlington-street. "Romance is not for the likes of me; I can't afford it."

Yet there was something rather romantic about him; something that attracted and fascinated her; something that gave him a distinction which she could not discern in Lionel, who was so much more distinguished looking. She sat for a while in the smoking-room, watching and listening to the two men (for, as she had anticipated, her husband had held himself excused by the lateness of the hour from putting in an appearance in Grosvenor-square), and she could not but perceive that one of them was extraordinary, while the other was ordinary. Lionel gave utterance to an affectionate protest when she rose to say good-night; but Strahan jumped up with alacrity and made ready to hold the door open for her. Such behaviour on the part of a stranger to whom she had gone out of her way to be particularly amiable, was, to say the least of it, extraordinary; what rendered it fascinating was that it was so obviously prompted by no affectation or ulterior motive. Strahan wanted to confer with her husband, and was consequently anxious to get her out of the room; nothing could be at once more unusual or more natural. Nor, for the matter of that,

could anything be more natural than that she should then and there determine to change his point of view for him sooner or later.

CHAPTER XIII.

DISCONTENT.

MARIETTA had expected her husband to give some account of his colloquy with the distinguished young Australian; but he did not allude to it, and at breakfast, the next morning, she was impelled by curiosity to ask: "What was Mr. Strahan so eager to say to you last night that he couldn't conceal his joy when I went to bed?"

Lionel looked up from the newspaper which he was perusing. "Strahan? Oh, he was full of his colony —which is a rising colony, I believe—and of a company which, it seems, is being formed to work the gold mines and develop the other natural resources of a thinly peopled district. He wanted me to take shares in it, and become a director."

"Did you consent?"

"Oh, not all in a hurry, like that; one will have to make a few inquiries. Strahan is an uncommonly clever fellow, and I presume he knows what he is about; but——"

"I thought you had such a high opinion of Mr. Strahan," interrupted Marietta impatiently.

"I have the highest opinion of his intelligence and capacity, and I can't see that there is much fault to be found with the fit of his clothes, to which you objected the other day."

"Then why do you speak with the voice of Mr. St. Quintin? You sound as if you disliked and distrusted him."

"My dear Marietta, what on earth do you mean? He is an old friend of mine, and if I can give him a helping hand in any way, I certainly will. All the same, I am not quite prepared to give a blank cheque to him or anybody else."

Marietta jerked up her shoulders and drew down the corners of her mouth. "How English you are!" she exclaimed. "It seems to me that if I could not trust a blank cheque to a friend, I should have no right to call him my friend."

Evidently she was in one of her unaccountable, irritable moods, and Lionel, perceiving this, returned good-humouredly to the study of his leading article.

Presently he looked up to remark, "I'm in a horrible funk. To-night, if you remember, I am to address the House for the first time."

"Is that so alarming?" asked Marietta, with a yawn.

"I can't give you the least idea of how alarming it is; nothing else in the world that I can think of is quite like it. I don't suppose I shall literally break down; but the chances are in favour of my making a fool of myself. Will you be there to see?"

"Oh, yes; that's all arranged, is it not? But I don't think you will make a fool of yourself. You are too——"

"Too what?"

"Too cool and sensible, and too sure of yourself in any emergency."

"Am I to take that as a compliment or the reverse?" asked Lionel, smiling.

She got up, without replying, stood for a moment at the window, looking out upon the park, and then left the room. She was conscious of being cross, petulant and unreasonable; but she could not help herself. Of all provoking people the most provoking is one who declines absolutely to be provoked, and she sometimes thought that if Lionel had had any real affection for her, he would resent her fits of causeless bad temper.

She wanted him to make a successful speech; but how was it possible to feel any excitement upon the subject? He was sure to be successful, and she did not believe for one moment in his alleged nervousness.

But in the evening, when she sat looking down upon him and his fellow legislators, who had assembled in large numbers, a different view of the ordeal which he was about to undergo forced itself upon her. To her sense those closely packed benches had a cold and unfriendly aspect; she perceived, all of a sudden, the difficulty of winning applause from an audience so indifferent, so somnolent and so evidently bent upon voting one way or the other, without regard to individual eloquence or argument; she almost wished that Lionel were not going to speak, although in the depths of her heart there lurked a hope that she might be destined to assist at a triumph won under adverse and depressing circumstances. Such a triumph would have provided her with what, in truth, she wanted—a reason for admiring her husband and associating herself with ambitions which had as yet failed to enlist her sympathy.

But, although the agricultural question is one of much importance, and although the House was greatly interested in a measure which might not improbably decide the fate of the existing administration, it does not precisely lend itself to purposes of fervid oratory, and a bill designed for the relief of farmers and landowners was, at the time of Marietta's arrival, being somewhat languidly advocated by a supporter of the minister in charge thereof. His remarks elicited a rather sharp and telling retort from the opposition; after which the debate warmed up a little, and speeches on both sides became shorter and brighter. What it was all about Marietta could but dimly surmise; she was already beginning to yawn behind her hand when at length Lionel arose, holding a sheaf of documents, to speak on behalf of the bill.

His opening observations, which were delivered in a clear, steady voice, were received with the attention

which is commonly accorded to neophytes, and presently the tribute of a slight cheer was paid to one of his statements. He was thoroughly well up in his subject, and said what he had to say in a simple, straightforward style which did not fail to secure for him the approval of his friends. But the most partial of those who sat near him could not have asserted that he was brilliant. After a time, when he waxed a shade more controversial in his tone, he had to face one or two interruptions from the other side of the House, with which he showed himself competent to deal. He kept cool, proved his case, so far as it was capable of being proved, and by the time that he resumed his seat had produced a decidedly favourable impression. There was, however, no visible and palpable triumph, no prolonged cheering, no evidence of the rising of a new Parliamentary star, and Marietta quitted the ladies' gallery with a disappointed shrug of her shoulders. After all, the result had been pretty much what she had anticipated— a sort of *succès d'estime*, obtained by one who was himself a large landowner and who had supported the landed interest in calm, dispassionate, gentlemanlike language. She was vexed with herself for having been momentarily excited and apprehensive over so tame an affair.

While waiting for her carriage she was accosted by St. Quintin, who offered warm congratulations, the meaning of which she begged him to explain.

"Didn't you hear Lionel's speech?" he asked. "Didn't you think it capital?"

"I heard it," she answered. "If you say it was capital, I suppose it was; but it was not very—amusing, was it?"

"Of course it wasn't meant to be that; but it was very well put and very much to the point. You will see that the papers will report it in full to-morrow."

"Yes?" said Marietta indifferently. And then: "Do you know whether he is coming out? I have to show myself at one or two places, and I can take him with me if he likes."

St. Quintin could not say, but thought it unlikely that Lionel would leave before the adjournment of the debate. "Shall I find out for you?" he asked.

"Oh, no, thank you; upon second thoughts, I would rather not see him until I have got rid of the memory of that heavy harangue. How thankful one ought to be that one is not a man and a member of Parliament!"

She was not feeling particularly thankful for that or any other of the numerous blessings that she enjoyed, nor had she much inclination to attend a gathering at one of the embassies, to which she had been invited. Nevertheless, she had herself driven thither. It would be a bore, she thought, and she would meet nobody whom she cared to meet; still it would perhaps be a little bit less dull than sitting alone at home. Being badly in want of a grievance, it occurred to her to resent Lionel's frequent and prolonged absences. That enabled her to bring a mental charge of selfishness against him and supplied her with the desired excuse for being displeased with him.

Almost the first person whom she saw, on reaching her destination, was Mr. Strahan. Really the man seemed to be ubiquitous, and he proceeded to give further evidence to that effect by announcing that he had just come from the House of Commons.

"So have I," said Marietta. "I hope Lionel entertained you more than he did me."

Strahan laughed. "Oh, he spoke very well; it was a good, solid, sensible sort of speech. He is a good, solid, sensible sort of person, you know—as befits his rank and fortune."

If this was a slightly impertinent remark to make to Lionel's wife, she overlooked that, in consideration of its being so completely in accord with her own view.

"Do you like people who are chiefly remarkable for their common sense?" she asked.

"I simply adore them—I'm a martyr to them! It is common sense that makes the world go round, and

the world would go round much more smoothly if everybody possessed that invaluable quality. Just now my greatest anxiety is to meet sensible men, and I don't meet as many as you might suppose. Consequently, when I do come across one, I am ready to fall at his feet."

"Even when he displays common sense by refusing to take the shares that you offer him?"

"Ah, that wouldn't show common sense; that would only show a prejudiced mind. On the other hand, it is entirely sensible to say that you will think it over and make inquiries. Your good husband will think it over and make inquiries—and take his place on our directorate. *C'est moi qui vous en réponds!*"

Again there was a suggestion of impertinence in his tone, and again she forgave him. How was he to help recognising Lionel's limitations? Their eyes met for a moment, and he laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked rather sharply.

"Oh, not at you, Mrs. Mallet. How could you think such a thing of me?"

"I didn't think it. You seemed to be laughing at my husband."

"Heaven forbid! If one didn't take one's future directors seriously, where would one be? Besides, I take most men seriously. Most men are serious."

"And women?"

"Well, that depends upon their wishes. They don't, as a rule, wish all the things that they say and imply to be accepted quite literally, I imagine."

This time, at any rate, Marietta could not doubt that the man meant to be impertinent, and she was about to snub him to the best of her ability (though her ability in that direction was not very marked) when somebody accosted her and put an end to the conversation.

But about a quarter of an hour later chance brought her once more into contact with Mr. Strahan. His

back was turned towards her, and he was talking to Lady Gosport—did he know everybody, then?—who appeared to find him an agreeable companion.

"Why should you return to that outlandish place?" Marietta heard her say. "I wouldn't, if I were you. Can't you stay in London and grow rich, while other people grub up gold for you?"

"That would be ideal," answered Strahan, "but unfortunately, the people who grub up gold have a nasty habit of putting it into their pockets, unless one is upon the spot to watch what they are about. I am afraid my native land will have to do without me for a time."

"Well, you will turn up again the day after to-morrow, no doubt, with a fortune of a million or two, and begin to patronise us all. What marvellous people you South Africans are! I wish you would put me on to a good thing—only it must be really *safe;* because I can't afford to lose money, you know."

Strahan explained that the colony in the prosperity of which he had a small stake was situated a very long way from South Africa, and that it did not as yet count any millionaires amongst its citizens.

"Oh, but it soon will," Lady Gosport declared confidently; "you have gold mines up your sleeve."

She turned to Marietta, of whose vicinity she became aware, and asked, "Isn't it the case that Mr. Strahan has gold mines up his sleeve?"

"I don't know anything about it," Marietta answered coldly.

Lady Gosport moved away to greet an acquaintance, and Strahan smilingly inquired, "What is the matter now?"

"You are insupportable!" exclaimed Marietta, her dignity yielding to her irritation; "you talk to me as if I were a naughty child, and—and as if you knew me well enough to have the right to assume that tone."

He apologised in the humblest terms; although his looks expressed somewhat less humility than his words.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself for taking such liberties," he confessed, "and I will try not to offend in that way again. But I am only a rough Australian colonist you must remember. I am apt to say what comes into my mind, and I can't help feeling as if I did know you rather well—as if we were friends, or going to be friends."

"Friends," returned Marietta, slightly mollified, "don't say rude things to one another."

"Don't they? I thought they sometimes did. Would it be rude of me, supposing I had the happiness of being your friend, to advise you not to be so discontented? That, I believe, is what I have been clumsily attempting to do, and that, I am afraid, is how I have managed to affront you. Yet it is the best of good advice; for there is no greater mistake in the world than being discontented."

His voice had taken a softer tone, and some subtle intuition told her that for the first time she had begun to enlist his genuine interest and sympathy. As this was what she had inwardly vowed to accomplish, her equanimity returned to her.

"And if one cannot help it?" said she.

"Ah! then one is face to face with a bad job. Only it is as well to make quite sure that the thing can't be helped; because——" He broke off, and resumed briskly, "But this is really absurd! Is one discontented when one is what you are and possesses what you possess? Do you know what I should do if I were in your place?"

She shook her head.

"I should—now, don't be angry, please, for I am speaking in deadly earnest, and I have your welfare at heart—I should take a couple of hours' exercise every day on a rough-paced horse, and I should endeavour to cultivate a philosophic frame of mind. What is the use of quarrelling with people and things for not being what they can't possibly be?"

At breakfast the next morning Marietta casually

informed her husband that she had met his friend, Mr. Strahan, again the night before, and that decidedly she did not like the man.

"He is clever, of course; but he gives me the impression of being hard and selfish and unscrupulous. I hope you will have nothing to do with his schemes."

"Yet you rebuked me yesterday for hesitating to give him a blank cheque," Lionel remarked.

"That was twenty-four hours ago."

"Well," said Lionel laughing, "twenty-four hours do sometimes make a considerable difference, I admit. For instance, I am several inches taller than I was this time yesterday, though you don't seem to have noticed it, and though you do consider me a dull orator."

It was a fact that his political reputation had become greatly enhanced by his speech and by the comments of the newspapers upon it. He had been congratulated at the time by the leader of the House; he was likely in the course of the day to receive many more congratulations, and if domestic applause was denied to him, he was too modest and too good-humoured to grumble at that.

"I don't wonder at your having been bored," he said; "the subject must be a desperately dry one to people who aren't interested in it."

A sudden wave of compunction came over Marietta and caused her to lay her slim fingers gently upon her husband's shoulders.

"I ought to be interested in what interests you," she returned; "I am going to try. It is such a pity that I can't care for politics or race-horses for their own sake! But I do take an interest in human beings, and I think perhaps I understand them in some ways a little better than you do. So that, if you would listen to me, I might sometimes be of use to you. I want to warn you against Mr. Strahan."

Lionel laughed. "What has the poor fellow been doing?" But his curiosity upon the point did not appear to be keen. "Anyhow," he remarked, "I dare

say I am old enough to take care of myself. Don't bother your head about me—or my politics or my racing either. Though, if it comes to that, they are both of them interesting pursuits."

She drew back, disappointed. "Very likely they are," she answered; "but they haven't it in them to satisfy me, unfortunately. I am what I am, not what I should choose to be. I can't explain myself, and—and nobody seems to understand!"

Ah, that eternal feminine complaint with which the average man finds it so difficult to have patience! Strahan had recommended horse-exercise (and had been very nearly recommending antibilious pills); Lionel looked gently tolerant and said nothing. From him, at all events, it was plain that comprehension of a complex temperament was not to be looked for.

They sat silent for a minute or two, his eyes straying back to the *Times*, which he had laid down beside his plate, and Marietta was about to relieve him of the burden of her society when a note was brought to her which she opened and read.

"Papa has arrived," she announced. "He writes from an hotel in Covent Garden—what a funny neighbourhood to have chosen!—to ask whether it will be convenient for me to see him if he calls this afternoon."

"Tell him," answered Lionel, "that if he doesn't immediately transport himself and his traps from Covent Garden to this house, *il aura affaire à moi!* I'm awfully glad he has come. What with one thing and another, I can't be much at home just now, and I'm sure you want a companion."

Marietta also was glad. If she was fond of anybody, she was fond of her father, and perhaps if there was anybody who understood her, it was he. She was not certain that he did—in some respects, indeed, she was certain that he did not; yet there had been moments of sympathy between them, moments when she had felt that he knew more about her than he cared to express verbally, and at least she could count upon him

to act as her protector, in case of need. What probability was there of her needing any other protection than that of the honourable gentleman whose name she bore. That she did not ask herself; but the messenger from Covent Garden took back with him a summons which in affectionate urgency left nothing to be desired.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COLONEL'S REMEDY.

In the course of the afternoon Colonel Vigne duly presented himself, looking very spruce and military in the tightly-fitting clothes with which a Vienna tailor had supplied him, and paternal pride, as well as a suspicion of moisture, could be discerned in the eyes that fondly contemplated his beautiful daughter. But he brought no luggage with him, nor could he be persuaded to take advantage of the hospitality pressed upon him by Marietta in her husband's name and her own.

"No, no!" he said, shaking his head and his uplifted forefinger, with a wise smile. "I want to remain near you for a time, and in order to do that, I must be free. I should never be able to feel comfortable if I suspected myself of being a troublesome old father-in-law."

"It would be impossible for you to be a trouble to Lionel," Marietta declared, "for you would scarcely see him. He is out all day, and almost all night."

"Ah, well! but I shall be more at ease in Covent Garden. Lionel is busy with public affairs, no doubt; it is an excellent thing for him that he should be busied in that way. And he is the best of husbands—is it not so?"

The look of subdued anxiety which accompanied this query was not lost upon Marietta, who made haste

to reply, "Oh, yes, you need not be alarmed, he is very kind. And very patient," she added, after a short pause.

"Patient? It is required of him to be patient, then?"

"How can you ask? Who should know, if you don't, that patience is required of everybody who lives with me? To the end of my days I shall be sighing for something that I haven't got, and make the despair of those who have given me all they have it in their power to bestow."

"Marietta *mia*, that is a deplorable disposition!"

"Yes, and I deplore it. But what would you have? one is what one is. For the rest, I am sure Lionel will tell you that I am perfect. Perhaps he even thinks so; for he is thoroughly pleased with his life and everything that belongs to it."

She was easily induced to mention some of her own reasons for being less thoroughly pleased. They were not very convincing reasons, and amounted, upon the whole, to little more than a confession that she was idle and bored; but the fact of making that confession gave her relief, and her father's puzzled, sympathetic old face acted as an anodyne to her irritated nerves. He did not quite clearly gather what her grievance was, yet in a measure he did understand; for he remembered her mother, who had given him some hours of sadness and perplexity in years gone by. Therefore he refrained from rebukes or the offer of good advice, and had recourse to methods which he had found efficacious long ago. He was by temperament a merry old gentleman; he could tell a capital story, and his winter in the *Kaiserstadt* had furnished him with an ample stock of these, which he proceeded to relate, with appropriate gesticulation, for his daughter's benefit. Thus, to his huge satisfaction, he succeeded in making her laugh heartily, and was able at last to tell himself that he had left her in much better spirits than he found her.

Nevertheless, when he walked away (for he declined

to stay and dine, alleging that he had promised to go to the play with an old comrade in arms who had accompanied him to London), there was no great disposition towards laughter in him.

"It is dangerous," he mused, "Lionel ought to be warned that it is dangerous. Yet how to warn him? How say to a man, 'Your wife is so beautiful that she is certain to have admirers in this great society of yours, and small attentions are the breath of life to her. Beware lest somebody else should begin to pay her the attentions which you have not time to remember!' No, it would be useless and impertinent to say that without saying more—*Gott bewahre!* I wish there were a baby—it is to be hoped that there will be a baby! Meanwhile, I must keep my eyes open."

During the week that followed, Colonel Vigne's anxious eyes saw nothing of a nature to cause him disquietude, and for this he did not fail to return thanks to Heaven. He was made to dine in Arlington-street on every evening for which his daughter and his son-in-law were not engaged elsewhere; he consented, notwithstanding his rather morbid fear of being a nuisance, to escort Marietta to sundry brilliant assemblages, and he satisfied himself that among the men who surrounded her there was nobody in particular whom she distinguished by her favour. Possibly—being on the look-out—he might have thought differently, had he seen her conversing with Strahan; but it so chanced that she was only once brought within speaking distance of Mr. Strahan, and on that occasion she somewhat markedly avoided speaking to him. She had, indeed, quite made up her mind that she did not wish to be intimate with that rather free-and-easy gentleman.

She could not, however, help receiving him when he turned up unexpectedly at luncheon one day—in obedience, as he explained, to a request from Lionel, who for once was to be at home at that hour. What she could, and did do, was to receive him with exaggerated chilliness, to ignore all his efforts to engage her in con-

versation, to devote her whole attention to a certain City magnate who arrived with her husband, and to leave the dining-room at the earliest opportunity. She could guess why the City magnate was there; she could guess what the three men were discussing over their coffee and cigarettes, and she perceived, with mortification, how little weight her opinions or warnings had with Lionel.

"Not that he is likely to lose money over this or that it would matter very much if he did," she mused, while she sat alone in the great, stiff drawing-room, to which she had not attempted to impart a homelike aspect; "only he might have paid me the compliment of arguing the question with me."

She had ordered the carriage at half past four, until which time she had absolutely nothing to do; so she yawned wearily, tried to read a novel which did not interest her, and said to herself for the hundredth time that life was a dull and disappointing business. Perhaps its disappointing nature was impressed upon her a little more forcibly by the slamming of the heavy front door, which she heard after a time, and perhaps it was not an altogether unpleasant surprise to her when the drawing-room door was opened almost simultaneously and Strahan's voice asked:

"May I come in?"

"Please, do," she answered, in high, cool accents. "What has become of Lionel and Mr. Hicks?"

"I forgot to inquire; they have gone off somewhere or other. They allowed me to remain behind—partly, I suppose, because they wanted to talk me over, and partly because I told them I wanted to have a word or two with you before being turned out into the street. Is it permitted to inquire why you are angry with me, Mrs. Mallet?"

There was a directness about the man's methods with which Marietta was too inexperienced to compete successfully. She did her best to snub him; she civilly gave him to understand that he was far too unimpor-

tant to have earned or merited her anger; she boldly and mendaciously declared that she had forgotten the liberties of which he accused himself. But his good-humoured persistency made short work of all these artifices, and she had to admit at length that she had thought him rather impertinent.

"Well," he said, "will you forgive me? I beg your pardon very humbly, and I assure you that I did not mean to be impertient. Indeed, it was just in order to avoid the temptation to impertienence that I ventured to recommend physical remedies for mental *malaise*. It was clumsy of me, I dare say; but I was afraid of being more clumsy and more offensive. The truth is that I have always been a clumsy sort of person in my dealings with your sex; all I can plead is that my intentions are of the best."

He appeared to be genuinely penitent, as well as anxious to be pardoned. Marietta, knowing that his time was valuable, was conscious of the subtle flattery implied in the fact of his presence, and she could not help smiling upon him.

"You are a man," she remarked; "that explains everything. But I am not so sure about your being clumsy. You say that Lionel and Mr. Hicks are talking you over: didn't you begin by talking them over and getting what you wanted out of them?"

He laughed. "Oh, I wasn't so modest as to pretend that I don't know how to deal with my fellow-men; it is with women that I am so apt to do what I ought not to have done, and to leave undone what I ought to have done."

"Lionel becomes a director, then?" she asked quickly.

"Perhaps. Oh, yes, I suppose he will. You may remember that I told you he would."

She was half provoked, half moved to reluctant admiration.

Something tempted her to the indiscretion of say-

ing, "Do you know that I did my best to prevent him from obliging you?"

"So I rather imagined," answered Strahan tranquilly; "I didn't know for certain."

"What made you imagine that? Did Lionel quote anything that I had said?"

"No; but his manner was so apologetic every now and then that I could see he had been lending an unwilling ear to calumny. I say calumny because I really am not a swindler, Mrs. Mallet."

"I never called you a swindler," Marietta declared, colouring slightly.

"No? But you don't like me, I am afraid, and, ignorant as I am of women, I do know that when they dislike a man, they believe him capable of any iniquity."

Marietta kept him some time waiting for a reply. At length she said: "I can sympathise with ambition; I am ambitious myself—or used to be. Only it is difficult to feel friendly with people who care simply and solely for their personal advancement and would sacrifice anything and everything to it."

"I am not one of those people," he returned earnestly; "there are soft places in me—which I am compelled, in self-defence, to cauterise as best I may. Don't tempt me to reveal them to you, but pray believe that, whether you feel friendly towards me or not, my feeling for you will always be one of the most devoted friendship. To say that is not to take an unwarrantable liberty, I hope; for, after all, a man feels as he must, not always as he would wish."

She smiled and thanked him and glanced at the clock—a hint which he immediately took. After he had left her she was inclined to doubt whether she had made the most that could have been made of a situation replete with possibilities; but, upon the whole, she was not dissatisfied. What was evident was that Mr. Strahan was extremely desirous of standing well with her; that he no longer considered her—if indeed he had ever

done so—as a *quantité négligeable;* perhaps also that he was less insensible to her personal charms than he had the air of being. She would probably be able, should such be her pleasure, to give him some anxious quarters of an hour yet.

But it was not, apparently, in her power to inflict similar salutary discipline upon her husband, whose deplorable good humour resisted all her efforts to disturb it, and who declined to discuss matters which he assured her that she could not understand when she subsequently taunted him with having been persuaded into bolstering up a doubtful enterprise.

"There never lived a more prudent man that I am," he said. "I put my arm in no farther than I can draw it back, whether it is a question of Australian mines or politics or racing. But Strahan is all right. You may take my word for that, and I hope you will overcome your prejudice against him. By the way, talking of racing, would you care to run down to Newmarket with me to-morrow for a day or two? It might amuse you to watch the gallops, and you would meet a lot of people whom you know."

Marietta was quite sure that she would derive no amusement at all from the occupation suggested, and was desperately tired of meeting people whom she knew. She added that she did not feel well, and wanted to know whether it was absolutely necessary that Lionel should leave her.

"Oh, I think, if you don't mind, I'll go," he answered. "It isn't absolutely necessary, of course; but I hardly know when I shall have another opportunity of looking at the animals I have in training, and I sha'n't be away more than three days—or four, at the outside. Couldn't we induce the Colonel to come and keep you company while I am away?"

Marietta replied coldly that that might be managed, no doubt; and, as a matter of fact, it was managed—Colonel Vigne consenting, under the circumstances, to accept the hospitality pressed upon him.

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow," the worthy Colonel said, in reply to certain expressions of hesitation and compunction on his son-in-law's part; "no reasonable being could call you selfish for giving yourself such a short holiday. God bless my soul! a man must be allowed to look at his own horses sometimes, if his trainers will kindly let him—which isn't always the case, I'm told. But women, you know, aren't reasonable beings; nobody expects it of them. Don't you bother about Marietta. The truth of the matter is, I suspect, that she is a little bit out of sorts just now; but she shall be well looked after during your absence, I promise you."

It was quite true that Marietta was physically out of sorts. She had a good many engagements for the days that followed her husband's departure; but she decided to neglect them all, alleging that she did not feel equal to the fatigue of keeping up conversation in heated rooms, and her father was not sorry to have her all to himself. She made the old man happy by taking him for long drives through the less frequented suburbs of London; she was touched by his affection, by his solicitude, by his evident anxiety to be assured that she did not regret the marriage which had made a great and wealthy lady of her. She might have given him that comforting assurance, seeing that she did not in truth repent of having married Lionel; but a desire to be petted and condoled with led her to formulate sundry specific charges against her husband.

"He tells me nothing," she said, one afternoon, when she and her father were strolling across Barnes Common, where they had stopped the carriage; "he takes it as a matter of course that I must have interests in life apart from his, and that it is sheer waste of time to talk politics to a woman or racing to an ignoramus. In a way, I dare say he is right; still, when two people have got to spend the rest of their lives together, that sort of friendly divorce seems rather——"

She left Colonel Vigne to supply the adjective,

which he carefully abstained from doing. He judged it wiser to assert that Lionel was afraid of wearying her, and that every man requires a little encouragement before he will consent to mount his hobbies.

Marietta laughed. "I don't know many men intimately," said she; "but, so far, that has certainly not been my experience of them. Oh, I know what you are going to say! I have no business to grumble; I am an exceptionally fortunate woman to be so rich and to have such an indulgent husband. But —isn't it perverse of me!—I should be fonder of a less indulgent husband, and what is more, it would be easier for me to believe that he was fond of me. Do you think that, a year ago, Lionel would have allowed me to go out into the world night after night, as I have been doing lately, without so much as taking the trouble to ask where I had been?"

In truth, the Colonel did not think so; nor did he think that any good purpose would be served by admitting as much. He had never been given to the analysis of human character; but he had had his little experiences, and, upon the whole, he was probably well-advised in rejoining:

"My child, do not take it into your head that Lionel is not fond of you, that, believe me, would be a very great mistake. If he is not jealous, it is because he trusts you—which is surely a compliment! For the rest, in married life there always comes, sooner or later, a difficult moment. '*Mit dem Gürtel, mit dem Schleier Reisst der schöne Wahn entzwei*,' as Schiller says."

"And what happens then?" asked Marietta rather tragically.

"Ah, that depends—that depends!" returned her father, laughing and glancing whimsically at her.

There is, of course, one thing which is extremely likely to happen to married people, and which seems to have been designed by Nature or Providence for the purpose, amongst others of composing nascent differences. He had a suspicion and a hope that it was going

to happen in this case; but as nothing of the sort had been hinted at, he contented himself with a casual suggestion, by and by, that the family doctor should be consulted.

"It strikes me, Marietta," he remarked, "that you want a tonic; it is generally the want of a tonic that makes us see things *en noir*."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You are like Mr. Strahan," she answered; "you think there must be a physical remedy for all ills."

The Colonel pricked up his ears. "Mr. Strahan? —who is he?"

"One of Lionel's friends. He noticed that I wasn't in the highest of spirits a short time ago, and he was good enough to recommend me a rough-paced horse."

That prescription did not meet with the approval of the physician who, at Colonel Vigne's instance, was called in on the following day; but he had a communication to make which was received with unqualified satisfaction by his summoner and not without a pleased, wondering agitation on the part of the person chiefly concerned. It made a difference, she thought—perhaps it even made all the difference. In any case, it rendered her eager for her husband's return and forgetful of many things which had hitherto seemed important.

So when Lionel arrived from Newmarket, there was something of a scene, and something of a renewal of bygone tendernesses. He was delighted, he was excited, he was full of absurd and unnecessary injunctions and precautions; for the moment, at all events, the question of the wife's health appeared to have driven all questions relating to public affairs or sport out of his mind. And Colonel Vigne, chuckling contentedly, said to himself, "I knew how it would be!"

CHAPTER XV.

STRAHAN DISPLAYS A FRESH ACCOMPLISHMENT.

THAT ladies in Mrs. Mallet's condition of health are apt to be capricious, and that their caprices should always, if possible, be humoured, is said to be an understood thing amongst persons of experience. Lionel remembered to have heard this, and was consequently not surprised when his wife expressed a strong desire to leave London forthwith.

"That can be easily managed," he told her, with ready acquiescence, "we'll telegraph to Ludworth and say they may expect you the day after to-morrow, if you like. They won't want more than one clear day, I suppose, to get things straight."

"And you?" Marietta asked. "Will you be able to move so soon?"

Lionel's face fell; he had not gathered that it would be required of him to abandon his parliamentary work at a somewhat critical period of the session.

"Well, not just at present, I'm afraid," he answered. "Of course, if it came to that, I *might* get a pair; but I'd a good deal rather not. It would be something like scratching one's horse immediately after he had gone up several points in the betting, you see."

"Would it? Why?"

"Oh, I don't mean to say that that speech of mine which you found so wearisome was a triumph of oratory; still, such as it was, it has made a considerable difference in my political prospects, and if I were to chuck the whole thing now, without giving any valid reason, I should probably have to wait a long time for another chance. Besides, I have a good many other matters to attend to which I couldn't very well leave at a moment's notice."

"Am I to be sent down to Ludworth all by myself, then?" Marietta asked.

"Oh, I hope not. I was thinking that perhaps your father would consent to go with you. But if the fascinations of London are too much for him, I am sure granny and Betty would be delighted to keep you company. And in a few weeks' time I shall be free, most likely."

Marietta looked so ill-pleased that he added hastily, "However, if you insist, I'll find some means of doing as you wish. Would it be possible to make a compromise, and postpone our departure—say, for another fortnight?"

Marietta replied that that would be possible, no doubt, but that she would prefer to get out of the hot, stuffy atmosphere of London at once, even if she had to go alone. She was a little, not to say a good deal, disappointed; for it did not seem to her unreasonable to ask what she considered a very trifling sacrifice of her husband; but she assured him that she insisted upon nothing, and would not for the world put him to inconvenience. How, indeed, was he to know that during the past twenty-four hours she had formed certain admirable resolutions, that it was not only from the material atmosphere of London that she was so eager to escape, and that she had taken herself somewhat severely to task for an infidelity which could scarcely be said to have passed as yet out of the early embryo stage? "I have it in me to be such an excellent, loving wife," she thought; "but I can see that I shall never be met half-way, and when one is left to one's own devices, like this——"

She did not end a sentence to which her father could, perhaps, have supplied a conclusion; but her devices for the time being were, at all events, unexceptionable, and the Colonel lent himself unhesitatingly to the furtherance of them. In Colonel Vigne's opinion, there were numerous objections to his quartering himself upon his son-in-law in Arlington Street; but he saw no reason at all why he should not accompany his daughter to Ludworth, where there would be no fine birds in fine feathers to look askance at a retired Aus-

trian officer, and where he might even venture to assume that he would be of some use. So the father and daughter abruptly forsook the scene of the latter's social successes, and Lady Gosport, who had secured Marietta's promise of singing at her next concert, was pardonably incensed.

"So much for gratitude!" she exclaimed. "That woman owes everything to me; if I hadn't introduced her last season, where would she have been? And now she throws me over with a cool note to say that she is sick of London! As if one shirked one's duties because one was sick of them!"

"I never should have thought, if you hadn't told me," said Lord Gosport, to whom this indignant apostrophe was addressed, "that it was a duty to squall aloud to several hundred people, not one of whom really wanted to listen. But cheer up, you can get another one."

"I cannot!" returned Lady Gosport, pettishly; "she has the only voice of that kind that there is. I think it is most inconsiderate and impertinent of her, and I shall make a point of telling Lionel so the next time I see him."

No such speech was made to Lionel, to whom, in truth, it would not have been a very safe speech to make. Even-tempered though he was, he certainly would not have permitted anybody to describe his wife as impertinent, nor did Lady Gosport venture to take so great a liberty. She merely remarked plaintively, when she met him, that her concert had been spoilt by the desertion of the chief performer: to which he replied that he was very sorry, but that it was a question of health.

There was not much the matter with Marietta's health; and if there had been, her grandmother-in-law would have been the woman to set it right. So, at least Lady Maria Halsted, who lost no time in inviting herself to Ludworth, boldly affirmed. Lady Maria was agreeably excited by the news which had been trans-

mitted to her; she was evidently under the impression that it behoved her to take charge of the interesting object of her solitude, and she hastened to say that, although it had been a little inconvenient to her to leave home at that particular juncture, she was prepared to stay any reasonable length of time in her grandson's house.

"I have brought Betty with me, you see," she explained; "so I shall be able to keep an eye upon you both—which seems to be the principal duty marked out for me just now."

And then she proceeded to lay down certain rules of daily life and conduct, suitable to circumstances upon which she could speak with authority; whereat Marietta silently laid back her ears.

Betty, who was a good deal less obtuse, took an early opportunity of saying reassuringly: "Don't mind granny; she'll give no trouble. You want to get rid of her, of course, and I'll manage that for you in a day or two, if you can't manage it for yourself. In fact, to tell you the truth, that was why I allowed her to inflict me upon you. Nothing would have prevented her from coming, and I foresaw that there might be difficulty in speeding the parting guest. I wonder whether you would mind asking papa to dine and sleep. He will accept an invitation, for I know he wants to look at Lionel's foals; but he would die rather than ask for one, and forty-eight hours may be regarded as the outside limit of his stay. Then you will be able to blow kisses at our retreating backs."

"I don't want to see *your* retreating back," answered Marietta; for indeed she liked the girl and was aware that Betty had been her friend during a critical period. "Couldn't you remain for a time after the others leave?"

Betty nodded. "Thank you," said she; "yes, I dare say that might be worked, if my old man doesn't object. And it's only fair to admit that he isn't given to raising objections, poor dear! If I ever marry, I shall

select some juvenile reproduction of him; for there never was an easier creature to live with. Lionel runs him a good second, don't you think so?"

It could not be denied that Lionel was an easy person to live with; so Marietta assented, though with a mental reservation. Qualities which may be admirable in a father or a father-in-law are not necessarily those which one covets in a husband, and the distinction between generous liberality and unflattering indifference has always been a rather difficult one to define.

To Lord Middlewood's demeanour towards his daughter-in-law, however, no exception could possibly be taken. He arrived, a few days later, in response to the suggested invitation, and made himself so courteous and pleasant to her, as well as to Colonel Vigne, that they would both fain have induced him to prolong his stay. But that he declined to do.

"Nowadays," said he, with a smile, "I am always either ill or just going to be ill, and I have a haunting dread of being seized with my last malady under somebody else's roof. Consequently, I think I had better get back home, now that I have had the pleasures of seeing you and the foals. I meant to have tried that bay cob which Lionel undertook to break in for me; but the stud-groom has the impudence to say that he isn't fit for me to ride yet. Such are the insults to which one is made to submit in one's old age! Betty, I am sure, would jump on to the little brute's back as soon as look at him."

It was only in consideration of a solemn promise on Betty's part to attempt no such enterprise that she was permitted to do as she wished and remain where she was. By means of what diplomatic pressure Lady Maria was persuaded that her son ought not to be left quite alone, and that it was her duty to accompany him to Middlewood, did not transpire; but the old lady departed when he did with many apologies and repeated assurances that a telegram would at any moment insure her prompt reappearance.

"And now," said Betty to the Colonel, with whom

she had struck up an alliance, "what shall we do to amuse Marietta? She strikes me as being a little down in the mouth. I suppose she wouldn't care about potting rabbits with a rook-rifle, would she? Because I've got one with me."

Colonel Vigne doubted whether she would. He himself, however, was not averse to the proposed form of amusement, and he made capital practice from the terrace with Betty's weapon, while the two ladies looked on. Other methods of passing the time, which, if not highly exciting, sufficed for the purpose, were discovered; the weather was perfect, and day followed day, without weariness or impatience on the part of three people who got on very comfortable together. Marietta did not avail herself of Lionel's epistolary permission to ask anybody she liked to stay with her. Indeed, she would have been puzzled to name any person whose presence she desired, and it was with an annoyed ejaculation that she heard from him, one morning, of the impending advent of an unexpected guest.

"Mr. Strahan is coming here to-day," she announced to her companions at the breakfast-table. "He has been to Manchester on business, Lionel says, and he proposes to pay us a flying visit on his way back to London. One doesn't quite see why!"

"Who is Mr. Strahan, when he is at home?" Betty inquired. "Is he a bore?"

"No; he isn't that. When he is at home, he is an Australian colonist, I suppose; though I am not sure that he regards Australia as his permanent home. At present he is working very busily on behalf of his colony with the great people here. You will probably like him, and I should think he would hardly stay more than a couple of nights," concluded Marietta, after a pause.

For her own part she was not disposed to give Mr. Strahan a very warm reception, notwithstanding the terms of renewed amity upon which they had last met. There was something about all his proceedings that moved her to antagonism, to the adoption of a defensive

attitude, which might or might not be superfluous. At any rate, she could see no reason why a busy man should branch off the main line from Manchester to London, in order to halt at Ludworth, and she thought her husband might have consulted her before giving an unnecessary invitation.

Nevertheless, the frigidity with which Strahan was greeted, on his arrival, soon thawed beneath the charm of his manner—a charm to which neither Betty nor Colonel Vigne was insensible, and which consisted, perhaps, rather in the contagion of his high spirits than in any visible effort to achieve social conquests. Moreover, he was able to give a plausible explanation of his intrusion.

"Your husband made me promise and swear to bring him back a full and particular account of your health, Mrs. Mallett," he said. "We were all very sorry to hear that you had not been feeling well before you left London; but I think I may conscientiously report that country air has set you up. I was also instructed to ride a cob which, I understand, is being broken in for Lord Middlewood, and to warrant him quiet and tractable, if I can."

"You won't be able to do that," observed Betty, shaking her head. "I mean, I doubt your being able to warrant him quiet. As for riding him—well, can you ride?"

Strahan smiled. "Oh, yes, I think so," he answered modestly; "I won't be so bold as to say that you would think so. But I am a light weight, as you see, and I have had a considerable experience of falls; so if the cob gets rid of me, I shall not be left upon Mrs. Mallet's hands with any broken bones, I hope."

"If you don't mind," said Betty demurely, "I should rather like to go out with you to-morrow and—and see the fun. I'm not allowed to mount such wild animals as the cob myself; but there is a solemn old mare in the stables who will carry me, and who will take care to give you as wide a berth as you can want."

This request was willingly granted, and after break-

fast, the next morning, Marietta watched the couple setting forth on an expedition which promised to be enlivened by exciting incidents. For the cob was very fresh, and if he did not succeed in bucking his rider out of the saddle the moment that he felt the grass under him, that was probably because Mr. Strahan was not at his first experience of buckers.

"Isn't it horribly dangerous?" asked Marietta, turning apprehensively to her father.

The Colonel laughed and shook his head. "It might be for old fellows like me and Lord Middlewood," he answered, "because we should be tired out at the end of half an hour; but that young man seems to be wiry and in good condition. He sits well, too. I dare say he can do a good many things more difficult than riding a young horse. There is a pluck about him and an energy which I admire; although I am not quite sure that I should choose him for a friend."

"Why do you say that?" asked Marietta quickly.

"Upon my word, my dear, I can't tell you," the Colonel confessed; "I have no sort of right to say it. But he was talking to me last night about his schemes, and, somehow or other, he gave me the impression of being rather more clever than scrupulous. Well, to be sure, that is the case with most prominent men, from Prime Ministers downwards; it's a necessary condition of success perhaps. I suppose, as you said nothing about it, there is no harm in his riding out with Miss Betty and without a chaperon. In my young days that wouldn't have been allowed, you know."

Marietta did not think that there was much danger of Mr. Strahan's laying siege to the affections of Lord Middlewood's daughter, although when Betty came in to luncheon, her companion having gone up stairs to divest himself of his riding attire, she declared in so many words that he was a man after her own heart.

"No swagger about him," she said, "but a genuine workman. That little brute gave him any amount of trouble at first, and he understood exactly what to do.

Decidedly I shall cultivate Mr. Strahan. Lionel has asked him to come down for the grouse-shooting, he tells me."

Strahan himself made very light of the achievement with which he was credited. The horse was perfectly good-tempered, he said; only high-spirited and rather inclined to be wilful.

"He isn't exactly what you could call an old gentleman's cob yet; but he very soon will be. All he wants is a little management. I only wish Mr. Sitwell and Mr. Hicks were as easy to manage!"

In the course of the afternoon, Marietta being left alone with him for a few minutes, took occasion to inquire whether he had found those two eminent personages recalcitrant, to which he replied with a laugh:

"Oh, not more so than was to be anticipated. I am asking a good deal of them, you see, and Rome wasn't built in a day. They are as civil as possible to me; so that I have nothing personally to complain of, and I rather enjoy a few difficulties. It is very evident, though, that I shall not be able to leave the old country again yet a while."

"Do you regret that?"

"Well, no," he answered musingly, after a brief hesitation; "I don't regret it. For some reasons I am glad. May I say that you are one reason."

Marietta frowned slightly. It sounded a somewhat impertinent thing to say; yet to show that she thought it so would be almost equivalent to paying him a higher compliment than she cared to pay him.

"You are very kind," was the would-be chilling rejoinder which finally commended itself to her.

"Oh, one must speak the truth sometimes. I have made a great many new acquaintances since I have been back in England; but you are the only one to whom I have felt drawn by—well, I suppose there is no other expression for it but natural affinity. It is rather bad luck that you should also be the only one who seems

to regard me with a sort of natural antipathy, isn't it?"

"I have no feeling of the sort," Marietta declared. "The last time that you accused me of disliking you, I told you what it was in you that I do not quite like. But really it is of no consequence."

"Of none to you, perhaps; but it is of some consequence to me. Well, I must try to be less self-seeking; for I suppose that is what you mean. All the same, a man must be rich if he is to practise universal benevolence. I am afraid I shall never get beyond either hating or despising my enemies and loving my friends."

He was silent for a moment, and then resumed abruptly: "Mallet asked me to run down for a week in August. May I accept the invitation, if I can find time?"

"*May* you!" echoed Betty, who drew near at this moment and caught his last words; "I should rather think you might! If Marietta won't have you, we'll put you up at Middlewood. Indeed, you will have to come to Middlewood then; for there are no grouse hereabouts."

"In that case," observed Marietta, laughing, "it doesn't rest with me to answer Yes or No."

CHAPTER XVI.

LORD MIDDLEWOOD CONQUERS AND IS CONQUERED.

At the fag end of a session the whips of a Government which is blessed with a substantial working majority can afford to be lenient, and Lionel Mallet, in pleading urgent domestic affairs, was given to understand that his presence at Westminster might be dispensed with.

"I suppose," observed the Junior Lord of the Treasury, who conveyed this kindly intimation to him, "your

domestic affairs are not altogether unconnected with Goodwood."

"Well, not altogether," Lionel confessed, laughing; "a man's horses are a part of his family. Besides, I hope to take my wife down for the week."

He quite hoped to do so, and he also hoped to enjoy a holiday which he was conscious of having earned. He had become greatly interested in politics, he had distinguished himself in a measure far beyond his expectations, and he meant to do a good deal of work during the recess; still he now felt entitled to devote some of his attention to sport, which, when all is said, remains the most satisfactory of occupations for a man who is rich enough to command the cream of it. It is needless to add that he likewise proposed to devote a large share of his attention to his wife—and how was he, as an eminently reasonable being, to guess that she would be satisfied with nothing less than the whole of it?

Reasonableness not being one of Marietta's eminent characteristics, the joy of the released legislator on his return to Ludworth was somewhat marred by the manner in which his suggestions were received.

"I wish there were no horses in the world, except those that are required to draw carriages and carts!" Mrs. Mallet exclaimed impatiently. "Oh, dear, no! I haven't the slightest wish to undertake that long, hot, dusty journey—nothing would induce me! Certainly not the prospect of spending hours and hours on a race-course. I thought we were going to have a few weeks of peace and quietness at home."

Lionel had been under the impression that his wife was not particularly enamoured of peace and quietness; but he refrained from reminding her of previous speeches which had seemed to reveal another order of tastes. He only said, a little ruefully:

"Just as you like, of course. After all, there is no necessity for me to go to Goodwood, and perhaps, now that one comes to think of it, the fatigue would be rather too much for you."

"We will get the doctor to say so, at any rate," answered Marietta, smiling (for she was pacified by his ready submission); "but I won't be so selfish as to spoil your pleasure. You will only be away about a week, I suppose?"

If she expected him to declare that he would not leave her at all, she was disappointed.

"Oh, the inside of a week," he replied, with alacrity; "and after that I shall be entirely at your service until we go to Middlewood for the twelfth. And you will have your father and Betty with you while I am away, you know."

"Well, no; as a matter of fact, they are both leaving the day after to-morrow. My father is due at Gastein, where he has already engaged rooms, and Betty, I believe, is wanted at home. She has only stayed here all this time out of good nature and because I begged her to remain until you arrived. But it doesn't matter."

"Oh, but I should think that might be arranged," said Lionel cheerfully. "I'll go and persuade them to stretch another point in our favour."

He was not able to persuade Colonel Vigne, who shrank from accepting further hospitality, and who affirmed, with truth, that he had promised to meet at Innsbruck a veteran comrade whom he must not disappoint; but Betty proved more amenable.

"I'm afraid my old man is getting a little down in the mouth, that's all," she said. "But he spoke of coming over to fetch me; so if he can be induced to stay a few days, that will be all right, and the change will do him good. He rather liked himself when he was here before, though he pretended to be in a great hurry to get away."

Accordingly, a lengthy telegram (Betty affected long telegrams and short letters) was despatched to Lord Middlewood, who returned a favourable reply, and who, as soon as he arrived, explained that he had been anxious to take that opportunity of consulting his son with regard to the purchase of certain lands which had come into the market.

"Otherwise," said he, "I should have hesitated to inflict my dreary society upon Marietta again so soon."

His society was never dreary, and if that of his daughter-in-law did not possess special attractions for him, he certainly behaved as though it did. 'I am delighted," he lost no time in telling Lionel, "to think that certain apprehensions of mine with regard to your wife were unfounded. She strikes me now as having accepted the situation, and what is perhaps more important, the situation—in the shape of coming maternity—has taken possession of her."

"You formed altogether mistaken notions about Marietta," said Lionel: "I was sure, all along, that you would change your mind when you came to know her better."

"My dear fellow, you couldn't have been sure; because nothing was certain at the time of your marriage, except that you were taking a leap in the dark. However, if you have landed upon your feet, so much the better; and, as I say, this approaching event is a matter for congratulation on all grounds. I suspect, though, that you have had a narrower squeak than you imagine, and that her acceptance of the situation was by no means a foregone conclusion."

"Dear me, was it such a difficult one to accept?"

"H'm, I should say that it presented difficulties—and temptations. But since they have been, as one hopes, overcome, we needn't talk about them."

Lionel was not at all disposed to talk about them. He was sitting with his father in the library, where they had been left in order that they might discuss business affairs, and he suggested that they should now proceed to do so.

But there was not, it appeared, very much to discuss. An occasion had arisen for the acquisition of two or three farms adjoining the Derbyshire property, of which Lord Middlewood judged it advisable to take advantage, and the approval of his heir, which he was in no way compelled to solicit, was promptly given. Any question re-

lating to the property, he explained, must be of greater interest to his heir than to him, seeing that his tenure of property and life was liable to be cut short from one moment to another.

Lionel laughed. "I am glad to say," he replied, "that I never saw you looking more fit than you do just now. I don't think you have anything in the world the matter with you."

"Oh, I have such a heap of things the matter with me that I think they must have arranged a sort of truce among themselves to decide which of them shall lead the final attack; for I own to feeling better than I have any right to feel. With luck, I may even manage a day or two at the driven birds next month; of course, I shall never attempt 'dogging' again. By the way, have you any names to add to this list for the twelfth? One wants to know the number of guns, and Betty, I believe, wants to know how many bedrooms will be required."

Lionel glanced at the slip of paper which his father handed to him. "I think that's all right," he answered. "You have got Strahan down, I see?"

"Yes: in obedience to instructions received from Betty. I don't know that I am personally consumed with anxiety to entertain the gentleman, but I understand that you are prepared to be responsible for him."

"For his shooting, do you mean?" asked Lionel.

"Well, for that amongst other things. But you don't stop there, do you? Aren't you in the position of vouching for his good behaviour, social and financial?"

Lionel laughed. "You pretend to bury yourself down in the depths of the country, and yet you contrive to know all about everything. Yes, I am to be one of the directors of Strahan's new company, which I am assured, on the best authority, is a sound undertaking. If you call that making myself financially responsible for him I am responsible. As for his social good behaviour, he hardly needs a sponsor nowadays; he knows a good many more dukes and duchesses than I do."

"And how much do they know of him, I wonder?

My own memory is so tenacious that I have not forgotten an episode in his university career which preceded—I won't say that it caused—his departure for the Antipodes."

"If you remember that," said Lionel, "I think you might also remember that another man was pretty conclusively proved to have been guilty. You are like St. Quintin; you can't forgive him for having dragged my name into the business."

"Mr. St. Quintin," observed Lord Middlewood drily, "is a young man for whose common sense I have a very sincere admiration. You are perfectly safe in making a friend of him; I must take the liberty of doubting whether the other fellow's friendship can be enjoyed with an equal sense of security. The company, I am told, is right enough—though I fail to see what need it had of your support—but in private life I wouldn't be too intimate with Mr. Strahan, if I were you. Why enter into competition with the dukes and duchesses?"

Lord Middlewood generally had good reasons for saying what he said, and possessed sources of information which it was not his habit to divulge. Lionel, who was familiar with his little ways, only smiled, and answered that he would make a note of it. His own temperament was the reverse of suspicious, and he saw no reason at all for regarding Strahan with suspicion. Moreover, there was absolutely nothing of which to suspect the poor man. What social mischief was it in Strahan's power to work? His father could have told him; but his father was far too wise and prudent a man to risk so great an indiscretion.

It is one of the many anomalies of human nature that our wisdom and prudence (when we have any) are apt to be more conspicuous in our treatment of our neighbours' affairs than of our own. Thus, after Lionel had departed for Goodwood and Colonel Vigne had set off for Styria, Lord Middlewood must needs take it into his head to ride the bay cob, which a competent authority had pronounced as yet unsuitable to carry an elderly gentleman.

It may have been because that authority was emphatically quoted by Betty and Marietta that his lordship displayed a good deal of obstinacy in the matter; anyhow, neither their eloquence nor that of the stud-groom availed to dissuade him from his purpose.

"I am the meekest and most down-trodden of men," he said; "but I do make bold to claim the right of riding my own horses, and perhaps I may, without undue arrogance, mention that I have had some slight experience of the art of equitation in my day. You, of course, will say, Betty, that my day is over. That may be; but I believe I still know almost as much about the management of a horse as you—perhaps even almost as much as your Mr. Strahan does."

"It isn't want of knowledge, it's want of strength," returned Betty bluntly; "I don't suppose the cob will put you down, but I'm sure he'll make you ill. Well, if you insist upon going, I shall go with you, that's all."

"Provided with a leading rein perhaps? My dear child, you will do no such thing. You will be good enough to stay where you are and amuse Marietta with sprightly conversation while I take a quiet canter across the park. If I come back one penny the worse, I will give you leave to condemn me to a bath-chair for the rest of my days."

He was really an excellent horseman and, as he had told Lionel, he was feeling stronger than he had done for some time past; so that the enterprise upon which he had embarked could hardly be accounted a perilous one. Yet he had not proceeded very far on his way before he was forced to the inward admission that he was an old fool, and that his daughter had not been far wrong in her summing up of the case. A certain amount of bucking and kicking is all very well; but even a young man is sensible of some exhaustion after ten minutes of it, and the playful cob showed every disposition to indulge in these gambols for a much longer space of time. He was, besides, an extremely powerful little beast—

so powerful that it seemed better to let him bolt over the grass than to try and hold him.

That, at least, was what Lord Middlewood said to himself; but the strict truth was that he had very little choice in the matter. What he could and did do was to retain enough command over his horse to avoid being knocked out of the saddle by overhanging boughs, and at length a stretch of rising ground enabled him to terminate that episode in his ride.

Subsequent episodes were, however, obviously to be expected, and in due course they occurred. Lord Middlewood so far triumphed over difficulties that he did not part company with the cob during two hours of violent exercise, and that he was able, on dismounting in the stable-yard, to say composedly to the stud-groom, "This will make a nice little hack some day; only you must give him plenty of work." But he staggered a little as he walked towards the house, and while he slowly and painfully mounted the stairs to his bedroom, he was fain to own that his victory had been a virtual defeat. Skill and knowledge—possibly even courage—may remain with us to the last; but the power to utilise what we possess passes away, beckoning us to follow soon. This old man, who was somewhat older than the actual tale of his years warranted, had been a strong man once upon a time; but he was physically strong no longer, and while he lay back in the armchair into which he had dropped, he said to himself ruefully that perhaps his mental capacity also had begun to yield to the inflexible law of decay.

"What do I know?" he murmured; "and what difference would it make if I did know? *La parole est aux jeunes;* they must make or mar their lives for themselves, just as we did, and Lionel, after all, may understand what he is about; though his wife, if I am not much mistaken, belongs to a class of women who are devilish difficult to deal with. Anyhow, he is a more level-headed fellow than I was at his age; one must get what comfort one can out of that reflection. Meanwhile,

I wonder whether I should scandalise the household if I rang for a glass of brandy. Because it strikes me very forcibly that unless I have one I shall make myself supremely ridiculous by being discovered in a dead faint."

It was in that condition that, about half an hour later, Lord Middlewood was discovered by his valet. The bell had not been rung; but the luncheon gong had sounded, and as the result of a hurried consultation below stairs, it had been decided to disobey his lordship's standing orders, which were to the effect that no servant should ever disturb him without having been summoned. Whether an existence of which its owner was more than half tired might have been prolonged by an earlier display of disobedience or not remained open to question. The doctor, who was summoned post-haste, and who arrived in time to certify that life had been extinct for two hours, thought not. Failure of the heart's action, induced by over-exertion, was his verdict, and he hastened to assure those about him that no shadow of blame attached to anybody.

But poor disconsolate Betty could not help feeling that a great deal of blame attached to her. There was little use in suggesting—as Marietta and others tentatively did—that she had lost that kindest and most indulgent of fathers because he had also been, upon occasion, one of the most obstinate of mortals.

"I knew quite well that he had no business to get on the back of that horse," she returned, through her tears, "and I could have prevented him if I had taken the trouble. I can always prevent anything when I take the trouble. You may say what you please, but I shall never forgive myself to my dying day!"

Yet a man who is enabled to leave this troublesome world without the preliminary misery of a long illness should be accounted fortunate, and it is by no means certain that Lord Middlewood had selected an inauspicious moment for severing his connection with human cares, anxieties and misgivings.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NEW RÉGIME.

SOME of us who are quite the reverse of young remember that, in our schoolroom days, we were made to commit to memory a touching little poem, the opening stanza of which described her Most Gracious Majesty (to whom Heaven grant many more years of health!) as having "wept to wear a crown"; and, indeed, it must be owned that, even under a constitutional form of government, a crown is rather too heavy a head-gear to be comfortable. A coronet, on the other hand, may, as a rule, be made to fit just as lightly and loosely as the wearer pleases, and as it is apt to be accompanied by numerous contingent advantages, those who succeed thereto are seldom looked upon as fit subjects for pity by their friends. Nevertheless, the wail of the extinguished politician has latterly made itself heard more than once from the lips of promoted heirs- apparent, and if ever anybody had cause to lament his abrupt elevation to the Upper House, assuredly that man was Lionel Mallet.

Already rich and a large landed proprietor, he could gain nothing from the Middlewood estates, save additional worry; public life had begun to fascinate him; he had made such a start in it as, by common consent, justified him in looking forward to office at no distant date; and now, by the caprice of destiny, he found himself condemned on a sudden to a career of more or less dignified obscurity. When to this is added, what was the simple truth, that the loss of his father was a very real grief to him, it will be perceived the many messages of condolence which awaited him at Middlewood had not been despatched to the wrong address.

It was to Ludworth that he was summoned by telegraph; but on the succeeding day he, with his wife and his sister, moved to the huge, gloomy house which was now his, and whither the remains of the late owner

were at the same time transported. The obsequies which followed were attended by a vast assemblage of relatives and friends, most of whom had to be accommodated for a night, and there were, of course, many matters of business to be transacted; so that it was not for some little time that the new Lady Middlewood (who, to tell the truth, rather enjoyed the sensation of being a viscountess) found an opportunity for the quiet exchange of ideas with her husband.

"You look quite ill," she began one morning; "I should never have thought that you would take this so much to heart."

"Do you think that I shouldn't care?" asked Lionel.

"Oh, I knew you would be sorry; we are all very sorry—and it was so dreadfully sudden, too! But—well, you are not much given to looking at the dark side of things, are you? You haven't a great deal of sympathy with such unfortunate beings as I am, who sink into despondency upon the smallest provocation, or even without provocation at all. Not that I blame you for that; I only wish I were like you!"

He understood that he was being reproached for having neglected her, and he made haste to express penitence. "I ought not to have gone to Goodwood—Heaven knows I wish I hadn't!—and I am afraid I have been behaving all this time as if you were strong and well, whereas I might have known that you were in no state to bear all that has been laid upon your shoulders. But there have been such heaps of things to think about! Are you feeling ill, Marietta?"

She was feeling quite well, and she said so; but she wanted some little notice to be taken of her, and she also wanted her husband to look a little less harassed and woebegone. Her queer, capricious, jealous temperament led her to detect something like a personal slight in his grief; and Lionel scarcely mended matters when he explained that, considerations of natural affection apart, the event which had happened was a most unfortunate one for him.

"I really can't see why it should make all that difference," she said, rather petulantly; "you will be in Parliament just the same, whether you sit in the House of Lords or the House of Commons; and if you are so ambitious—but it never seems to me that you have any real ambition—surely you are a greater man now than you were before poor Lord Middlewood died!"

Lionel smiled and shook his head.

"Well, at all events, we are richer," she persisted, "and of higher rank."

"We shall go in to dinner for the future before some people whom we used to follow, no doubt. As for being richer I am not so sure. You know, I suppose, that I only succeed to the entailed property; my father left everything that he could—and quite rightly—to Betty."

Marietta had not been aware of that, and the news did not altogether please her.

"Betty is a great heiress then?" she said.

"Very much so; for it may be taken as certain that she will inherit my grandmother's money. I wish she were not obliged to turn out of her old home and go to Chelton, poor child! But that, I am afraid, is unavoidable."

Marietta did not respond to the appeal which was visible in her husband's eyes. She was fond of Betty, but she knew the young lady to be of a masterful disposition, and there would be obvious objections to her remaining in a house where she had once borne rule.

For the rest, those objections were perfectly patent to Betty, whose common sense did not need to be reinforced by the behests of Lady Maria.

"I should be in everybody's way, including my own, here," she told her brother, "and I shall be a positive godsend to granny, who is so lonely and miserable that I do believe she would end by marrying Mr. Grace if she were left to her own devices. So you see I owe it to myself to go and keep her under proper control."

Betty, after the first violence of her grief had spent itself, strove gallantly to resume the style of speech

and bearing to which all who knew her were accustomed; but her efforts were not rewarded with any striking success, and it was a very sad and sobered little lady who presently set forth for Chelton to open a fresh chapter in life. That her father's will had made her rich and would, in a few years, render her magnificently independent was no sort of consolation to her. She had always had as much money as she had wanted, and the liberty which even her governesses had scarcely attempted to restrict, was now, as she well knew, about to be seriously threatened.

"The first thing to be done," she mused, "will be to get rid of old Grace. Otherwise there will be trouble; for he will certainly disapprove of my ways of going on, and he is far too dense and self-satisfied to abstain from saying so. I wonder whether Lionel couldn't get him the offer of a colonial bishopric."

The new Viscount Middlewood, had such a suggestion been addressed to him, would have replied that he had no longer influence enough to procure the offer of anything for anybody. St. Quintin, who deplored his removal from the Lower House as much as he did, assured him by post that he must by no means regard his political career as closed; but his own conviction was that it might as well be so regarded, and the thought saddened him; for he was full of life and energy, and had of late begun to suspect himself of possessing some measure of ability into the bargain. He would have to stick to sport, he supposed: after all, the turf offers an honest and able man plenty of scope for the employment of surplus energy.

Meanwhile, the twelfth of August was at hand, and what was to be done about the moors? The invitations sent out by his father had, of course, been cancelled, and the entertainment of anything resembling a house-party was not to be thought of; still grouse must be shot, just as meals must be eaten, whether one is in mourning or not.

"Three guns will do," he told his wife. "I think

I will get St. Quintin to come down—and perhaps Strahan. Would you mind having Strahan?"

"Not in the least," answered Marietta. "Why should I mind?"

"Well, you say that you dislike him and distrust him."

"I may have said so; I am not sure that I say so now. At any rate, if he shoots as well as he rides, there will be no need to distrust him in the capacity for which he is wanted."

"Oh, he can shoot," answered Lionel; "he is one of those lucky beggars who can do anything that they want to do."

So a note was despatched to Mr. Strahan who replied by return of post that he believed he could manage to give himself a holiday of a week or ten days. St. Quintin and he arrived together on the eve of the twelfth, and the former had not been a quarter of an hour in the house before he candidly told Marietta that he was not precisely enchanted at finding himself under the same roof with the latter.

"I have never half liked that fellow, and I never shall," he said. "I wish Lionel wouldn't make a friend of him!"

"You don't think well of the Australian Company?" asked Marietta.

"I certainly shouldn't if I had only Strahan's word for its prospects; but I am told that it is going to be a success, and he has influential people at his back—Lionel amongst others. The Australian Company will pay good dividends, I dare say; it's the personal company of the secretary that I don't see any particular need for. However, I don't suppose you agree with me."

She was all the less inclined to agree with him because her feminine instinct had warned her from the outset against the subject of these disparaging remarks. She took Strahan's part; she wanted to hear in plain terms what there was to be urged to his disadvantage, and, on being told that there was nothing, she observed

that, under those circumstances, it was scarcely fair or generous to run him down.

St. Quintin admitted that it was not, and had no rejoinder to make when Lady Middlewood resumed rather severely:

"It seems to me that you are too fond of running down people about whom you do not know much. There was a time, not so long ago, I think, when you used to run down my father and me."

Well, at least Mr. Strahan's prowess upon the moors was not to be disputed by St. Quintin or anybody else. He returned, fresh and smiling, after a long and very hot day, having walked his companions clean off their legs, and claiming thirty-two brace to his own gun; which, in that part of the world, had to be accounted a highly creditable performance over dogs. He had, moreover, so thoroughly enjoyed his tramp over the heathery moorland that it was impossible to help being infected by his good humour.

"We all wanted cheering up," remarked Marietta, after dinner, "and you have given us what we wanted."

To which he replied briskly, "It's everybody's duty to be cheerful, Lady Middlewood. Personally, I don't find that a difficult duty to discharge."

"But it seems that you never find anything difficult."

"Oh, excuse me! It isn't half as easy as might be supposed to persuade Mr. Sitwell that two and two make four; it hasn't been by any means easy to secure the friendly support of old Hicks; least of all is it easy to secure yours."

"Yet I always fight your battles. If you were to speak of Mr. St. Quintin's friendly supports, for instance——"

"Ah, that's not to be had; I am endeavouring to get on as well as I can without it. Is it with him that you have been waging battle on my behalf?"

As she did not reply, he resumed, "It is delightful, anyhow, to hear that you sometimes speak a good word

for me when my back is turned. Do you know, Lady Middlewood, I would rather have one good word from you than twenty from—shall we say, your very important and powerful husband?"

"Lionel pretends that he has lost all power and importance by succeeding to the title. Do you think that I can be of more use to you than he, then?"

"I didn't say that that was my reason," answered Strahan. "You still set me down as a man whose eyes are steadily and consistently fixed upon the main chance, I see."

His eyes were at that moment gazing straight into hers, from which they were not very distant. Seated on a low chair by her side, he was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Lionel and St. Quintin, dead sleepy after their long day's work, had gone off to keep themselves awake, if possible, with a game of billiards; the long room was silent and dimly lighted; if Mr. Strahan was not making love to his host's wife—and indeed he was not—he had a good deal the appearance of being so engaged. Possibly this struck him, for he suddenly pushed his chair back, and added, in a somewhat altered voice:

"Well, you're perfectly right; the main chance is just what I'm bound to keep perpetually before me. I remember telling you once that, case-hardened as I am, there are vulnerable places about me; but it doesn't do to talk of them—or think of them. Let it be agreed that, if I value your friendship, it is chiefly because the friendship of a great lady must be valuable to a poor devil with his fortune to make. After all, even that view of things ought to give you a sort of interest in me."

Marietta replied composedly that she had always felt a great interest in Mr. Strahan. It would be greater, of course, if she knew a little more accurately than she did what his immediate aspirations were.

He had not the least objection to telling her. He leant back in his chair, stretched his legs out, and drew a quick, graphic outline of the career at which he aimed.

He did not want money only—although he did want that, and meant to have it—his ambition was to be the practical creator of a dependency, as yet sparsely inhabited and almost unknown in the mother country, which should become one of the most important of British colonies; he wished, in short, to be amongst the great ones of the earth while his life should last, and he wished that life to be full, combative, and exciting.

"Well, that's all," he concluded. "At least, there's just one thing more that I, as a rather lonely and friendless man, not much given to making confidences, should like to have; but I don't suppose I shall get it."

"Oh, you have it," she answered, smiling. "If my sympathy is of any use, you have it."

For the truth was that he flattered her immensely by choosing her as the recipient of this confidential statement. How unlike he was to Lionel, who, to be sure, had ambition of a kind, but who so evidently preferred being ordinary to extraordinary, and who, besides, seemed very well able to dispense with her sympathy.

An incident, which was significant or trivial according to the light in which it might happen to be regarded, occurred a few days later, and confirmed her in her irritated impression that Lionel did not deem her an adviser worth consulting. Lady Maria Halsted, who had driven over from Chelton, unaccompanied by her granddaughter, to take possession of certain trinkets which had been bequeathed to her by the late Lord Middlewood, remarked casually that she had met the sportsmen on her way, and had had a short talk with them.

"I rather like that Strahan man," she said; "he is a shrewd fellow and, I should think, less unscrupulous than people of that class generally are."

"What class?" Marietta inquired.

"There is no actual name for it; but one recognises its members when one comes across them. The pushing class—the political—colonial—commercial class, I mean. I made a point of asking him whether he was prepared to support the Aborigines Protection Society, and he assured

me that he certainly would, if there were any aborigines in his colony to protect. So far as it went, that was satisfactory; and I understood him to promise that, in the event of his going into Parliament, he would oppose those shocking little African wars which are so discreditable to us as a nation. He says the time has come for us to turn our attention to Australia, which is already ours, instead of robbing these poor black creatures of their territory, upon the chance of gold being found in it."

"But surely Mr. Strahan has no idea of going into Parliament," said Marietta.

"Dear me, yes! Didn't you know that there is a probability of his standing for your husband's vacant seat? Lionel is very anxious that he should; the only question seems to be whether the Australians who sent him over here will consent. But he has telegraphed for instructions, I believe."

Marietta was a good deal mortified. Why had she been kept in the dark as to a project which had apparently been mentioned without any thought of secrecy to a lady whose lack of discretion was notorious?

"Did they tell you all that this morning?" she asked.

"Oh, no," answered Lady Maria; "I heard it from Lionel a day or two ago. Of course it is advisable, before taking any definite step, to find out how Mr. Strahan's candidature would be likely to be received by the constituency. That was why I asked him about the aborigines and the Church Missionary Society and so on. Many of my tenants, I am glad to say, are Godfearing persons."

This explanation scarcely mended matters. "I suppose," said Marietta, "they did not tell me because they knew what a matter of absolute indifference the whole thing would be to me. I have never been able, and I never shall be able, to pretend to the faintest interest in politics."

Lady Maria thought it her duty to remonstrate. A good wife, she pointed out, is always interested—or, at

the very least, pretends to be interested—in what interests her husband. "I do assure you that in my poor, dear Halsted's time, I used to read the money article in the newspaper every morning, just in order to be able to talk intelligently to him about it."

"And did you talk intelligently?" Marietta inquired.

"Perhaps not; for most of it, I confess, seemed to me to be downright gibberish. Still he appreciated the effort, and he enjoyed setting me right when I was wrong. One must make these little sacrifices; otherwise all sorts of distressing things are liable to happen."

It says something for Marietta's self-control that the old lady departed, shortly afterwards, without having been told to mind her own business; but less forbearance was manifested towards Lionel when he returned from shooting and was beckoned by his wife into the great, deserted library.

"Do you think," said she, "that the first news I have of your affairs ought to come to me from outsiders? Do you think that anybody is likely to respect me much when it is seen that you consider that kind of treatment good enough for me?"

He was completely taken aback; nor was his surprise diminished after the nature of her grievance had been unfolded to him.

"My dear girl," he exclaimed, "how was I to guess that you would take my silence as a slight! One doesn't talk about these things, because they are best not talked about until some decision has been taken; but of course you are welcome to know as much as we know—which is very little. Strahan has not at all made up his mind to stand. Indeed, if old Blathwayt, who has been approached, consents to come forward, he won't even be asked."

"Yet you told Lady Maria."

"Well, yes; I did tell granny; and I dare say it was rather imprudent of me. But she has ways of getting at the voters which are not open to me, and I thought we

might obtain some idea through her of how the land lay."

"Oh, I quite understand," answered Marietta. "She may be useful, whereas I am useless."

"I think you must know that that is nonsense, Marietta," said Lionel, his face clouding over a little.

"And if it is?" she returned, making for the door. "You wouldn't wonder at my taking refuge in nonsense if you knew how sick I am of living in a perpetual atmosphere of sober common sense!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BETTY PAYS ST. QUINTIN A COMPLIMENT.

That anybody could really and seriously object to living in what Marietta called "an atmosphere of common sense" was well-nigh incredible to her vexed and puzzled husband. Surely common sense is the one thing indispensable for the smooth conduct of earthly affairs, and ninety per cent. of the public and domestic troubles which afflict humanity are due simply and solely to the want of it! In Heaven's name, what sort of an atmosphere would she prefer? But he answered the question for himself, with a shrug of his shoulders and a laugh of returning good humour.

"Well, an atmosphere of romance, I imagine," he muttered. "After all, that is natural enough, and one can't wonder at it. Besides which, it is only natural, I suppose that she should be a little peevish and hard to please just now. I'll go and beg her pardon—though, upon my word, I don't quite know what I am to apologise for."

Marietta, whom he found extended upon a sofa in her

dressing-room, assured him that there was no need for apologies.

"It was ridiculous of me to show temper and to feel hurt because Lady Maria was better informed than I," she said. "Why should I care to be well informed about Mr. Strahan and his election?"

"I remember that you didn't much care to be informed about mine," observed Lionel; "I dare say that was why it never occurred to me to mention this project —which is only a doubtful and conditional one, anyhow —to you. I should like to see Strahan in the House, and I think myself that if he is offered a chance, he would be wise to take it; but he doesn't seem to be particularly keen. Most likely the thing won't come off."

Marietta protested complete indifference upon the subject with so much apparent sincerity that he was fain to do as she presently requested him and talk about something else. He did not speak of the inherent beauty of common sense, nor of that inevitable disappearance, deplored by Schiller and quoted by Colonel Vigne, of the romantic element from married life: such topics, he perceived, might easily provoke a return of the irritation which she seemed to have dismissed. He did what was a great deal more to the purpose by seating himself on a footstool beside the sofa and gazing at her with eyes of genuine admiration, while he read out a letter which he had just received from the jewellers relating to certain family diamonds, which had been sent to them to be reset.

But if this was very nice of him, and if Marietta appreciated his kindness—as she declared that she did—to the extent of freely forgiving him anything that she might have to forgive, it by no means followed that she was prepared to extend the same magnanimity to a confidential friend who had so conspicuously failed to take her into his confidence. During dinner, therefore, Mr. Strahan's remarks were pointedly ignored, and not until the evening was far advanced did he obtain an op-

portunity to inquire of what fresh offence he had been guilty.

"But it is all so absolutely uncertain," he pleaded, when he had been furnished with the desired information. "I doubt whether my engagements will allow of my entering Parliament at all, and even if they did, I am bound to give way to this old Mr. Blathwayt, if he consents to be nominated. He refused last time, it seems, because he was over seventy, and because he thought that it was your husband's duty to come forward; but we are assured that he would now be returned, unopposed, and a contest is not considered desirable."

"Consequently," interrupted Marietta, "it seemed to you more prudent to refrain from saying a word to me until the question was settled, one way or the other. That was prudent behaviour, no doubt; but—I don't think it was quite in accordance with our compact."

Had they entered into a compact, then? He had not been aware of it, and he involuntarily raised his eyebrows for an instant. But he hastened to say:

"My dear Lady Middlewood, if I were not afraid of wearying you, you should be told at full length about every humble little iron that I have in the fire. Well, I'll be honest; I dare say you wouldn't mind being told, and it's a poor compliment to a friend to suspect of her being wearied in that way. But a compact ought not to be all on one side. If I am to lay bare the innermost secrets of my heart, I may fairly ask to hear something in return, may I not?"

Marietta averred that she had no secrets.

"Well, but you have joys and troubles and anxieties and so forth which are, at all events, secrets to me. Or you will have them. And perhaps you sometimes feel a wish to impart them to somebody—or you will feel it."

She smiled and inclined her head slightly. Thus was concluded a treaty which presented many of the features of an offensive and defensive alliance, and which was obviously not free from peril for one of the contracting parties.

Marietta, however, took no immediate step towards the fulfilment of her part of the bargain. In a certain sense Strahan had become her friend; but he continued, as he had done from the outset, to repel almost as much as he had attracted her, and she did not as yet feel prepared to tell him in so many words that she was disappointed and disenchanted with her lot. That, for the time being, her life must be desperately dull Lionel perceived and acknowledged: of course it could not be very amusing for her to be left quite alone from morning to night in that vast, empty house. But the difficulty was that she had practically no intimate of her own sex, except Betty, and there was a tacit understanding to the effect that the former mistress of the household had better not be asked to stay until the new mistress should have established herself a little more firmly in the saddle. To give up a day's shooting now and then was a measure of heroic self-sacrifice which, it must be owned, did not suggest itself to the proprietor of the famous Middlewood moors. Not until the weather suddenly broke, and became wet, cold and stormy did he and his companions reluctantly recognise that they had done about as much execution as they were likely to do over dogs that season; and even then they showed no disposition to spend their time indoors.

One morning, when a report had been brought in that the birds were already packing, Lionel made up his mind to attend a meeting of local Conservatives at which it was expected that Mr. Blathwayt's decision would be announced, and Strahan, after some hesitation, agreed to accompany him.

"And what will *you* do?" asked Marietta of St. Quintin, with whom she was still as unable as ever to hit it off, and who, to tell the truth, did not particularly relish the prospect of sharing her solitude.

"I thought of driving over to Chelton to pay my respects to Lady Maria," he answered. "Lionel said I could have a dog-cart, and there are some things belong-

ing to her, I believe, which she forgot to take away with her when she was last here."

Lady Middlewood offered no opposition to this project, nor did she (as in his heart he had been half afraid that she would) suggest that her own daily afternoon drive might take the same direction. So he enveloped himself in an ulster, made for the stables, and was soon bowling at a rapid pace up hill and down dale, through the wind and the rain. Lady Maria would give him some luncheon, he supposed; but if she didn't, he had no objection to dispensing with that meal, whereas he did rather particularly object—it was useless to deny it—to the unrelieved society of his hostess. St. Quintin was a just man, and as free from prejudice as most of us; but he had his very distinct likes and dislikes, and he was not more fond of Lady Middlewood than she was of him.

For Betty Mallet, on the other hand, he entertained sentiments of friendship which he hoped were reciprocated. It was, therefore, a great pleasure to him, on nearing his destination, to recognise that young lady, marching ahead of him, with a fox-terrier at her heels, a gun over her shoulder, and bulging pockets which told their own tale.

"Rabbiting?" he asked, after greetings had been exchanged and he had explained that he was on his way to deliver certain packages to Lady Maria.

"As you see," she replied. "You might give the reins to William and walk as far as the house with me, if you were inclined to be civil. The fact is," she added, lowering her voice, when St. Quintin had promptly complied with this request, "that I would just a tiny little bit rather not be seen entering the house in this get-up without your protection. Not that I am afraid of granny or anybody—pray don't imagine such a thing of me! Still she won't say much before you, and if one can manage to avoid a scolding, why shouldn't one, you know?"

"What is wrong with your get-up?" asked St. Quintin. "I should call it a very becoming one."

"Well, it's serviceable; but it's rather too short in the skirt to be what granny would call becoming. I am supposed to be almost, if not quite, grown-up now, you see, and her notion of what is becoming in grown-up people is that they should ruin their gowns when they go out rabbit-shooting. Supposing, that is, that it could possibly be becoming on their part to fire off a gun at all."

"You must give your grandmother some anxious moments," remarked St. Quintin meditatively.

"H'm!—maybe. But it's about as broad as it's long; for she gives me a good deal of anxiety, too. Anyhow, I'm an immense blessing to her. Oh, not a blessing in disguise—a positive, tangible blessing, as she herself admits when she is in good humour. We thoroughly appreciate one another, mind you, in spite of occasional differences; and we haven't, either of us, got many people left to care for now."

St. Quintin glanced at the girl beside him, thinking to himself how pretty she was, how charming, and, judged by ordinary standards, how fortunate; yet, for some reasons, how much to be pitied! Some great match would doubtless be arranged for her ere long, and if she declined the first candidate, she would have to accept the second, or the third, or the fourth. For the moment, while nominally under tutelage, she was practically free to do as she pleased: nominal liberty would probably reduce her to practical servitude. Weighed down by her money-bags, she would be unable to dart aside from the course which led to high social position, and strong though her will was, she would find that circumstances were even stronger.

"You will be coming out next season, I suppose," he remarked presently.

"Yes, I believe so. I am not exactly looking forward to it; for I hate London, and there is something particularly offensive to me in the sort of bad manners which smart women affect. Still, as the thing has to be done, it may as well be done properly. Imagine the cheek of that old Grace, who has been preaching to granny,

and has almost persuaded her that a presentation and a fortnight in town will suffice! It is so important, he says, that the young should not be inoculated with a taste for godless frivolity!"

"Well, you say that you hate London," observed St. Quintin.

"Yes; but it doesn't follow that I am to take instructions from him. If I did, I should soon begin to hate the country into the bargain; for he is conscientiously opposed to sport in every form. In fact, I have seen for some time past that it will be necessary to get rid of Grace. How does one get rid of a beneficed clergyman who would never dream of undertaking missionary work, and who has no chance of promotion?"

St. Quintin shook his head. "The thing can't be done, I'm afraid," he answered. "Unless a man resigns his living, there is no way of removing him from it. Flagrant misconduct, such as intoxication during divine service, may bring about inhibition or suspension, I believe; but I presume that Mr. Grace is not very likely to be guilty of that."

"Well, I don't know," said Betty pensively; "one might try. He is very fond of port. Anyhow, go he must; for this place really isn't large enough to hold him and me. It is a pretty place, don't you think so?" she added. "Much prettier than poor old Middlewood."

The rain had ceased; shafts of sunlight had broken through the clouds; flying shadows were sweeping across the hills and the lake, which lay beneath the old gray house, with its smooth lawns and its bright-coloured flower-beds. Chelton was undoubtedly a very pretty place, and St. Quintin could not help thinking that before very long it would be inhabited, if not actually owned, by somebody who would have an extremely pretty wife.

"Yes; you have a goodly heritage," he returned, with something of a sigh.

"Oh, what a nasty thing to say!" exclaimed the girl.

"Grace himself couldn't have said a nastier thing! Happily, granny is as hard as nails, and I have every reason to hope that I shall inherit nothing from her until I am middle-aged. Why do you laugh? Do you think I want to be left absolutely alone in the world? I suppose your idea is that I shall marry. Well, that is just where you are mistaken. I shall not be such an idiot as to surrender my liberty in a hurry, I can tell you! The only man who could tempt me would be some quiet, submissive little creature—an invalid, for choice—who would do exactly as he was told, and never get in the way when he wasn't wanted."

"Such a man would be the very worst possible husband for you," St. Quintin declared decisively. "On the contrary, what you want is a kind, but firm master, who——"

"Oh, Lord! oh, Lord;" interrupted Betty; "come in to lunch before I shoot you where you stand! It's very evident to me what *you* want; a long, shiny black coat and a white choker would make you quite complete. Now I'm going to slink round to a side-door, while you go in and smooth down granny, who, I know, has been taking stock of my costume from her bedroom window."

Lady Maria had, in truth, been so employed, and for the next quarter of an hour St. Quintin had his work cut out to persuade her that garments which would have been considered shockingly unfeminine twenty or thirty years ago are no longer disproved of in the best families. He also (on being consulted) ventured to doubt whether it would be wise to enforce too rigid an observance of Evangelical principles upon a young lady who did not seem as yet to be drawn in that direction.

"Ah, well!" said Lady Maria, with what sounded very like a sigh of relief, "that's just what I tell poor, dear Mr. Grace. One would wish everybody to be converted; but one can't shut one's eyes to the fact that most people aren't; and for those who aren't—well, one must do the best one can, that's all. My feeling is that the girl ought to have her London season, in spite of our

mourning. How is she to discover the hollowness and emptiness of such things with no experience of them?"

"How indeed?"

"No doubt, if it came to that, Clara Gosport or Marietta would take her out; but then I should really feel that I was neglecting my plain duty. I am sure her dear father would not have wished me to confide her to Marietta for her first season."

"I don't think he would," said St. Quintin.

Lady Maria pricked up her ears. "You have the same impression of Marietta that he had; you suspect that she is capable of follies—is that what you mean?"

"I am not very well acquainted with Lady Middlewood. I have no reason to suspect her of anything," answered St. Quintin stolidly. "But perhaps she is rather too young and rather too new to London society for—for the purpose that you speak of."

Betty's entrance was a relief to him; for he did not wish to be questioned respecting a lady whose proceedings, so far as he had been enabled to take note of them, had inspired him with no very great confidence. He had less difficulty in replying to the numerous queries which were addressed to him, during luncheon, about Mr. Strahan, in whom both Lady Maria and her granddaughter seemed to take a lively interest. Fortunately, there were plenty of interesting things which could be said about Strahan without risk of compromising that gentleman's reputation.

"And when," asked Betty, who strolled out to the front door to take leave of the guest, "will one see you again? You will be coming down to Middlewood some time in the autumn or winter, I suppose?"

"Well—if I'm asked, and if my chief can spare me," answered St. Quintin.

"Get your chief to spare you, and I'll undertake that you shall be asked. You may not be all that I could wish—occasionally you say things which make me long to box your ears—still, upon the whole, you remain the most satisfactory member of my select circle of friends. So,

if you don't come down here to please yourself, come to please me."

A saturnine butler and two tall footmen in mourning livery were privileged to listen to this flattering declaration, which did not cause them to move a muscle, but which brought a faint flush to St. Quintin's ingenuous cheek.

"If I come to these parts again soon, it will certainly be to please myself," he answered.

Then he climbed into the dogcart and drove away, wondering idly whether it would not be a very pleasant thing to be one of those young sprigs of nobility of whom Miss Mallet would ere long be invited to take her choice.

CHAPTER XIX.

BENIGNA DIVA PRIFORMIS.

St. Quintin returned to Middlewood to find Lionel and Strahan already back from their meeting, which, it appeared, had not had quite the result anticipated and desired by the late member.

"Blathwayt yields to the representations of his friends," Lionel announced. "He fears that the state of his health will not permit of very active political work, and he thinks it not impossible that, owing to the same cause, he may be compelled to resign his seat before the expiration of the present Parliament. Subject to the drawbacks, however, and in the absence of any more robust candidate, he is willing to come forward; and it only remains for him to assure us that such measure of health and strength as may yet be granted to him will, etc., etc. I must confess to being a little disappointed; but, of course, there was nothing to be done but to shake the old boy by the hand and join in the general cheering."

"Perhaps," observed Marietta, who was pouring out tea, "he will die soon."

"I'm afraid that isn't at all unlikely," answered her husband. "One doesn't want the poor old man to die; but I should be glad to see him retire. Let us hope that one session may suffice to sicken him of Westminster. Then we shall know where to look for a suitable person to replace him—or, at least, I hope we shall."

The last words, which had a slightly interrogative reflection, drew no immediate reply from Mr. Strahan, who was placidly munching buttered toast and who did not appear to participate in the disappointment to which Lionel had owned. Presently, however, he remarked: "You will find a candidate without having to look quite as far as Australia for him, I imagine."

"My dear fellow," said Lionel, "you aren't going back to Australia."

"Am I not? I expect I am, though! For the next few months, no doubt, my services will be required in London; but after that it will behove me to go and see that certain steps which have been approved of and sanctioned are taken. Besides, I really want to go. It's better to be a personage in ever so remote a part of the globe than to be only one of a crowd in the centre of civilisation."

"On my own behalf, and on that of your numerous friends in this country, I beg to thank you for your very flattering sentiments," said Lionel. "It doesn't follow that, because you can leave us without a pang—"

"Oh, I didn't say that," interrupted Strahan.

"Well, it doesn't follow that, because you are prepared to leave us even with a pang, you will consult your own interests by doing so. It is all very fine to talk about being a personage out there, but you must know very well that you are bound to be a personage, wherever you are."

The fact was that young Lord Middlewood had formed a very high opinion indeed of the capacity of his friend. That may have been, and probably was, in some

degree, because Strahan was an excellent shot and a good judge of a horse; but the secretary of the new company had had other opportunities of proving his ability to one who was too conscientious a man to join the directorate without having gone pretty thoroughly into the company's affairs.

Strahan laughed, and said "Thank you;" while St. Quintin observed, a little ungraciously, that no particular distinction was involved in being a member of Parliament, and that, for his own part, he should think that a man whose interests were connected with the Colonies would best consult them by definitely accepting a colonial career.

"Quite so; nothing can be more self-evident," agreed Strahan good-humouredly. "Meanwhile, I must get back to London and work without further loss of time. Isn't there a train somewhere about eleven o'clock to-morrow morning?"

Marietta, with a quick movement of impatience, had risen from her chair and now left the room. She was angry with St. Quintin, whose misfortune it was to strike her as impertinent almost every time that he opened his lips; but she was also displeased with Strahan, and in the course of the evening she took occasion to make him aware of her displeasure.

Amongst the glories of Middlewood was an enormous and, to tell the truth, excessively ugly palm-house, which was sometimes lighted up at night, and whither, on that evening, Lionel suggested that the after-dinner coffee and cigarettes should be taken. Whether Lady Middlewood, when she got up, after a time, and strolled away to the far end of this vast structure, intended one of the gentlemen to follow her or not could, of course, only be a matter for conjecture; but at all events, one of them did. He had a reason for taking that liberty, he said; he wished to explain (in obedience to treaty obligations) why he had accepted with philosophy, not to say satisfaction, the candidature of Mr. Blathwayt. He would have been ready, it appeared, to enter Parliament, had

a chance which was not very likely to recur in a hurry been offered to him; but at the same time, he was anything but convinced that to do so would have been to his advantage. He was proceeding to give some highly interesting details respecting the state of public affairs on the other side of the world when Marietta ruthlessly swept them away with a wave of her hand.

"As if all that could possibly signify!" she exclaimed.

"Well," said Strahan, looking a little hurt, for once, "you told me that you wished to hear about the things that are of importance to me. Otherwise, of course, I should never have presumed to inflict them upon you."

"Oh, very well!" she returned impatiently, "go on with your dreadful statistics, then. Since you say they are important, one must assume that they are so—to you. Though I must say I agree with Lionel in wondering that you should care so much more for such dry subjects than you do for your friends."

"I don't think he accused me of that, did he? He pretended to think that I should leave England and all my friends here without a pang—which was absurd upon the face of it."

"You said that you wanted to go."

"Yes—well—I supposed I do want to go. Why not?"

Without any consideration for the head gardener's feelings, Marietta broke the leading shoot off a rare tropical shrub. "It is perfectly natural that you should wish to go," she answered. "At the same time, such speeches are scarcely of a kind to arouse the enthusiastic sympathy of those whom you propose to leave behind you."

"Ah, my dear Lady Middlewood, you don't understand! If you did, you would be able to sympathise, though you might not be enthusiastic about it. But I won't attempt to make my position more clear; I will only ask you to believe what is the truth, that my friendship for you is not a mere question of propinquity."

Marietta mused over this assurance for a minute, and then remarked: "Well, that has the sound of being a noble sentiment; but I am afraid I can't quite rise to it. I am afraid that, for any comfort I should be likely to get out of a friend in the southern hemisphere, he might as well be dead."

But Strahan was not in the southern hemisphere yet, nor was it at all certain that his possible return thither would imply permanent banishment. "Anyhow," he added, with a laugh, "I trust I shall be neither on the other side of the world nor dead in December next, at which time I am kindly invited to visit Ludworth and do a few days' hunting."

He was cheerful and pleasant and kindly; he went on talking after a fashion which was evidently intended to put her in a better humour; he obstinately refused to see that she was incensed against him or that she had any cause for being so.

Well, perhaps that was the proper way for a friend to behave, and perhaps she would have resented any other sort of behaviour. Nevertheless, nothing is more provocative of feminine resentment than the sense of having been deprived of any tangible offence to resent, and Marietta, when she had retired to the stately and rather dreary rooms set apart for her use, said to herself that, after all, she was by no means sure that she liked the man. Upon further reflection, she was able to accuse him of at least one genuine offence, in the shape of his apparently complete freedom from anxiety respecting her health. He could not be ignorant of the ordeal through which she must soon pass, and though conventionality might forbid him to allude to it, he might surely have contrived to let her see that he felt for her. He had said laughingly that he hoped to be alive in December; but it was upon the cards—quite upon the cards—that she would not. Had he so much as thought of that? If not, what was his friendship worth?

St. Quintin, had he been consulted, would probably have told her that Mr. Strahan's friendship was worth

nothing at all—if, indeed, it ought not to be regarded in the light of a minus quantity. But the opinion of that prejudiced observer was not asked; nor, in truth, was he very well qualified to judge; for like many other strictly honest and honourable men, he was apt to assume that his fellow-creatures must needs be either good fellows or scoundrels. And it had never been in his power to consider Strahan a good fellow.

Lionel, on the other hand, had no hesitation in thus qualifying both of his guests, who caused him sincere sorrow by departing together the next morning. He stood, with his hands in his pockets, at the front door, gazing rather ruefully after them, and then asked his wife, "Well, what's to be done now?"

So far as he was concerned, there were plenty of things to be done, and his days were not likely to be idle; but that, as Marietta understood, was not his meaning.

"It can't be helped," she answered, in a somewhat despondent tone of voice. "The house is horribly big and empty; but we couldn't ask people to stay now—and I shouldn't like to have them if we could."

"We might have granny."

"Oh, not yet, please! She would worry my life out. Later, I suppose, she must come." Marietta paused and then exclaimed suddenly, "Oh, how I *hate* it all! It is wicked of me, I suppose; but I do!"

Lionel comforted her to the best of his ability; and really his ability in that direction was not small; for his love for his wife had suffered no diminution, and it was impossible to doubt the sincerity of his sympathy. She would doubtless have been a far happier woman, had he, as a general rule, been a little more demonstrative; but it was not in his nature to be that, nor could he understand why, when he had once said a thing, anybody should want him to go on repeating it.

What he regretted more and more, as the days wore on, was that Marietta had no intimate friend of her own sex. Betty was a mere child, Lady Maria could only be

looked upon as a *pis-aller*, and for himself, it was simply impossible that he should be much at home. A certain great landowner, on being requested to accept a post of responsibility, is said to have excused himself upon the plea that it took him all his time to be Duke of ——, and although Lionel's possessions and interests were not so vast as those of the nobleman in question, he soon found that, if he was to do his duty, not much leisure would remain to him for amusement. It may not have been, strictly speaking, a duty to run over to Newmarket or to devote a day or two to grouse-driving; still it would have been a pity to neglect such occupations altogether. And so, what with one thing and another, Lady Middlewood's life became a deplorably solitary one.

To do her justice, she did not audibly complain, though she had some bitter thoughts. She recognised that there was no help for this rather unfortunate and depressing state of affairs, and when, in the autumn, Lionel suggested that there would now be no lack of respect for his father's memory in asking a few people to come for the shooting—the Gosports, for instance, and one or two others whom she knew pretty well—she begged him not to do so.

"I am so accustomed now to living like a hermit crab," she said, "that I should feel quite nervous and uncomfortable if I had to entertain anybody."

"Hermit crabs," observed Lionel, "inhabit shells which don't belong to them."

"I suppose that accounts for my feeling like one. Anyhow, my only wish is to hide myself until—until I can go about again as usual."

Would she ever go about again? It was a very natural misgiving, which pressed upon her the more because she was fain to keep it to herself. Once or twice she had alluded to it in talking to Lionel, who had laughed at her in the boisterous manner affected by those who are really apprehensive and who are quite determined not to admit that they are so. Lionel, she supposed, would be sorry if she were to die, and so, no doubt, would her

father; but both of them would certainly be consoled within a year, and nobody else would care a pin. Sitting alone in her silent boudoir, or driving through the now yellowing woods on chilly afternoons, it occurred to her again and again that life is only a grim, ugly jest. Horses, carriages, diamonds, sables—all those things which look so enviable from afar lose their attraction almost as soon as they can be had for the asking; and in spite of wealth and rank, one may at any moment have to die, like the humblest washerwoman. Sooner or later, indeed, one *must* die. But these melancholy reflections upon human destiny, which, without being precisely novel, yet strike most of us occasionally in the light of a startling discovery, had to be abandoned on the arrival of the inevitable Lady Maria, full of joyous anticipation and equipped at all points for the performance of her part on an interesting occasion. The old lady was so cheerful and so confident both in herself and in the special protection which Providence could not fail to extend to Lord Middlewood's wife that her presence proved, after all, to be more of a comfort than a worry.

"My dear child, there is not the slightest occasion for nervousness," she declared; "if there had been, we should have known of it before now. Everything will go as smoothly as possible, you will see."

Perhaps she contributed a little towards the fulfilment of her own prediction: in any case, things did pass off with tolerable smoothness, and on a wild, gusty morning of late autumn Marietta had the pride of knowing that she had furnished an important family with an heir to whose physical proportions no exceptions could be taken. Such achievements may or may not be a legitimate cause for pride; but, as everybody knows, they generally are productive of it, together with other and tenderer emotions against which there is nothing to be said. During the quiet, uninterrupted period of convalescence which followed, Marietta was—almost for the first time in her life—placidly contented. She was, after all, a woman, if a somewhat wayward, unstable and potentially

unprincipled one; she was delighted with her baby and very well pleased with her husband, who was now unremitting in his attentions—besides being the baby's father.

"I have always thought," remarked Betty, "that one of the chief drawbacks of matrimony was the risk of having a lot of children; but now I begin to see that it is quite the proper thing to have one. I never saw anybody look much happier than you do now, or more thoroughly miserable than you did a short time ago. It certainly seems to make a difference."

"Well, yes," agreed Marietta, smiling, "I believe you are right, it does make a difference."

CHAPTER XX.

STRAHAN IS A LITTLE PUZZLED.

WHAT can be more delightful to a man who loves hunting, but can not afford to keep hunters, than to find himself speeding northwards in an express train on a mild, misty day of mid-winter, and to reflect that he is bound for the house of a wealthy and hospitable friend, who may be counted upon to provide him with as good a mount as money can buy? Supposing that such a man had been for many weeks past hard at work day and night, beneath the perpetual pall of London smoke and fog, his enjoyment of the prospect before him would naturally be enhanced, while his satisfaction would be rendered complete by the thought that his discarded labours had produced every good result that had been expected of them.

Roland Strahan, therefore, when he set out, shortly before Christmas, to keep an engagement of which he had more than once been reminded by letter, was in a mood to be very generous to railway-guards, and as amia-

ble as possible to the world at large. The world at large had, indeed, treated him so well of late that the least he could do was to turn a smiling countenance upon it. Everything was going admirably with him; the company was fairly launched upon a career which promised to be long and glorious; his latest advices from Australia were not only most encouraging from a financial point of view, but highly flattering to him personally; he had made some notable additions to the circle of his acquaintances in England, and had been given to understand pretty plainly that (in acknowledgment of certain valuable information and facilities which he had been enabled to provide) he might rely upon support in influential quarters, should he ever stand in need thereof. In short, there was something more than a possibility of his becoming within a few years both rich and powerful. That, so far as he knew, was the summit of his ambition. If life has anything better to offer than riches and power, he was quite willing to dispense with that better thing. Health, of course, is indispensable; but he had always been so absolutely healthy that it no more occurred to him to congratulate himself upon the possession of that essential boon than it does to the generality of us to return thanks because we were not born deaf and dumb. In the meantime, everything led him to believe that he had a very pleasant week or ten days to look forward to. He was going (so he had been told) to form one of a rather large house-party, which included several persons whom it might prove to his advantage to meet; he had a sincere liking for Lionel, and as for Lady Middlewood, about whom he had not of late had leisure to think much or often, the prospect of renewing friendly relations with her was by no means unwelcome to him.

A faint smile of amusement curved the usually firm set of his lips as he leant back in the railway-carriage and pictured Marietta to himself under her new aspect of the young mother. Would the heir-apparent be prominently brought forward, he wonderd, or accepted, as Lady Middlewood was wont to accept her

other possessions, with disdainful and dissatisfied toleration?

"What gives women a certain interest as a study," mused this heart-whole philosopher, "is that no living being can tell what they will make of any given event, or what it will make of them. That renders them devilish awkward to deal with, though! Lady Middlewood is charming; but—I don't think I particularly want to change places with Middlewood."

He did not, at that moment, want to change places with anybody; he was not even impatient to fill the higher and more lucrative place to which he himself aspired and was justified in aspiring; he had wisdom enough to know that joy consists in pursuit, not in attainment, and the pursuit of the fox, amongst others, had immense attractions for him.

So it was a gentleman of amiable and prepossessing aspect who was shown into the library at Ludworth, where a considerable number of people were grouped in the neighbourhood of the fire-place, drinking tea. His hostess did not chance to be present; but Lionel, who stepped forward to shake him cordially by the hand, introduced him to such of his fellow-guests as he did not already know, and the impression that he produced upon these was a decidedly favourable one. Strahan's manner had that mixture of assured ease and simplicity which is generally held to be characteristic of good breeding, and although, in his case, breeding had not very much to do with it, he knew as well as anybody what to say and how to behave in such company as he had just joined. He knew also (for he deemed the acquisition of social information most important, and never missed an opportunity of adding to his store thereof) something about each of the ladies and gentlemen whose bows he returned. As most of them were more or less distinguished persons, it was easy enough to know something about them; but Strahan knew things which were not known to all the world. This enabled him not only to avoid blunders but to convey the suggestion that he was

by no means the outsider he might appear to them to be. For the rest, he had no air of desiring to thrust himself forward; he merely claimed the recognition which was at once conceded to him, and which would have been refused, perhaps, to a more diffident stranger.

He did not see Lady Middlewood until just before dinner, when she extended a friendly, but scarcely effusive greeting to him. She was looking superb in her black satin and her flashing diamonds; sincerely as Strahan had always admired her, he had never until that moment realised how great her beauty was. She was changed, moreover—changed alike in manner and in expression, both of which were almost radiant. Strahan, who, during dinner, could scarcely keep his eyes off her, said to himself that if this was the effect of having become a mother, his notions respecting her ladyship would have to be modified.

"She was by way of having missed her vocation," he thought; "is it possible that she can have found it after this ludicrously commonplace fashion?"

His neighbour, a plain, weatherbeaten, little woman, whose husband was one of the magnates of the turf, noticed the direction in which his glances kept straying and said: "Isn't she quite magnificent! No wonder Lord Middlewood is such a devoted husband."

"Is his devotion so conspicuous?" asked Strahan.

"Oh, dear, yes! Just watch his face if she sings this evening, as she probably will. It is a pity that she doesn't hunt and doesn't care for racing, though."

"Perhaps she will learn."

"Well, I hope so, for her sake; because I don't believe it is in the nature of any man to go on caring for any woman who doesn't like the things that he likes. An unfortunate cousin of mine married a man who had a craze for astronomy—a quiet, grubby old thing of forty, who, one would have thought, was simply incapable of scandalous behaviour. Well, just because she couldn't see the difference between one star and another and couldn't bring herself to take an interest in their ways

of waltzing about the heavens, what did that old miscreant do but elope, one fine morning, with a hatchet-faced spinster who had fallen into the habit of visiting his observatory. Luckily for me I was born in close proximity to a racing-stable and I have ridden to hounds ever since I was the height of this chair; so my husband continues—I won't say to adore me, but to think me one of the right sort."

"There is no danger of his eloping, then."

"Oh, *he* won't elope; he isn't as young as he was, and he knows it wouldn't be good enough. I dare say Lord Middlewood, whom I suspect of being a bit of a puritan at heart, though he is an excellent fellow, won't elope either. But——"

"But what?"

"Don't invite me to say libellous things, please. I only maintain that a wife who doesn't adopt her husband's tastes will lose his affection sooner or later, and there are women who can't endure a man whose affection they have lost."

Now, this did not seem to Strahan to manifest any special acuteness or much knowledge of the lady whose case was under discussion. If Marietta had not actually told him that she was not in love with her husband, she had allowed him to infer as much, and he had difficulty in believing that any coldness on Lionel's part would tempt her to throw away a position which she undoubtedly appreciated, notwithstanding her frequent intimations that she found it a bore.

Still, as he himself had reflected earlier in the day, one never can tell what a woman will do or not do, and it was with somewhat quickened interest that he approached Marietta on the termination of the song with which, as he had been led to expect, she subsequently favoured a spell-bound audience. Of the quality of the singer's voice and the merits of the composition, his total lack of musical ear prevented him from forming any opinion; but he gathered from the admiring comments of his neighbours that both were of a high order, and he

did not fail to pay his tribute of applause where applause was so evidently due.

"And I have other subjects upon which to congratulate you," he added, after she had moved away from the piano and had invited him by a slight gesture to seat himself beside her on a sofa.

"The baby, you mean? Yes, he is really an enchanting baby; though I suppose I ought not to say so."

"Nobody is more clearly entitled to say so. But I was not thinking of him at the moment; I was thinking of the enormous and unmistakable improvement in your spirits. Your opinion of the world and its inhabitants has changed a little for the better since I saw you last, has it not?"

She glanced at him half defiantly. "What if it has?" she returned. "I was miserable at Middlewood, which must be the most melancholy house in England, I think, and I was all alone there. Here the rooms are pretty and bright, and I have people to talk to."

"Yet you don't hunt, I am sorry to hear; and hunting people, as a rule, have only one topic of conversation."

"You have more than one; and so has Sir George Burroughes, who is—what is he?—First Lord of the Admiralty, or War Minister, or something. At all events, he amuses me; and even if he didn't, I should always have baby—and Lionel."

This was really a little startling; possibly it was meant to be so. "Does she wish me to understand," though Strahan, "that, having become tardily alive to her husband's transcendent merits, she has no further need of a confidential friend?" In spite of himself, he was slightly piqued, and he became more so when it transpired that she had not particularly missed him during their late period of separation.

"You have been in London, haven't you?" she asked, frowning, as if in a vain effort to recollect who he was and what he was likely to have been about. "How hideous London must be at this time of year! But you

will enjoy a few days with the hounds now. You are going out to-morrow, I suppose."

"Yes, I am going out to-morrow," he answered, looking steadily at her, "and I certainly hope to enjoy myself. My object in coming here was, of course, to hunt and to enjoy myself."

She smiled pleasantly and turned her beautiful head away to speak to somebody else, who had drawn near. What, he wondered, was she driving at? No man ever quite understands such feminine tactics, as adopted towards himself (although when employed in the case of another man, they are seen to be of an elementary simplicity); but Strahan, who was cool and shrewd and not wholly devoid of experience, suspected that Lady Middlewood wished to provoke him.

To escape being provoked, he quitted her side, and was presently beckoned across the room by Betty, who had come over from Chelton on a flying visit. Betty was very glad to renew acquaintance with him and very full of sporting talk. They were sure of a run on the morrow, she told him, and he would be sure of seeing it; for she had ascertained that Lionel was going to put him up on Bullet.

"The very best horse he has, in my opinion," she added. "You will find him a little bit quick at his fences; but he won't make any mistakes, if you let him go his own pace, and it's impossible to tire him."

In due course Betty's prediction was fulfilled, and her respect for Mr. Strahan became greatly enhanced after she had watched his performance in the field, which gave evidence of pluck as well as judgment. Her own performance had been admirable, and he took the liberty of telling her so, while they were jogging homewards, side by side, at the end of the day.

"Well, I believe I am improving," answered the girl. "A few seasons ago I used to ride like a lunatic; but I had one or two tremendous croppers, which my poor dear father, luckily, never heard of, and now I know rather more than I did. However, I have always been

well mounted, you see, and I suppose I always shall be; so that there isn't much real chance of my covering myself with glory."

Betty's modesty was perhaps a trifle exaggerated. Anyhow, after making due deductions for the undeniable advantages which she possessed, Strahan, at the end of three days came to the conclusion that she was the best lady-rider he had ever beheld. There were several packs of hounds within reach, and for three consecutive days he was enabled to admire Miss Mallet's prowess. At night he, like the majority of his neighbours, was apt to be very sleepy; and this, it may be, prevented him from taking any overt notice of the marked disregard with which he was treated by Lady Middlewood. But on the third evening he chanced to take Mrs. Martindale, the lady who had fallen to his lot on his arrival, in to dinner, and she (being of a frank habit of speech) saw fit to open the conversation by remarking:

"I have been keeping a sympathetic eye upon you and the heiress. Take my advice and don't be buoyed up by false hopes. She is to come out next spring, and Lady Maria Halsted is her grandmother. I can assure you, if you don't know it, that that means a very great match indeed. It isn't Lady Maria's piety that will induce her to neglect her duty, you may depend upon it!"

Strahan was genuinely amused. Betty Mallet was only a child, and even if she had been a grown-up young woman, she would have been as safe in his company as in that of her grandmother. Of that he was perfectly well aware, for he was under no illusion either as to his own social standing or as to the light in which the girl regarded him. Nevertheless, Mrs. Martindale's rather silly speech put a notion into his head upon which he proceeded to act during the evening. It has been said repeatedly, and with truth, that he was not at all disposed to make love to Lady Middlewood; still he did not quite relish the cavalier fashion in which he had been treated by her since his arrival at Ludworth, and he thought it might be interesting—just by way of a harmless experi-

ment—to find out how she would like to see him paying assiduous court to somebody else. Therefore he paid assiduous court to Betty, who received his attentions with apparent pleasure, and he had not been thus engaged for twenty minutes before he had the satisfaction of perceiving that Lady Middlewood did not like it at all.

Marietta was a poor hand at disguising her feelings; nor did she often deem it worth while to do so. In the drawing-room, while some of her guests were noisily engrossed in a round game, and others were gravely discussing the political situation (which had become critical at the moment, owing to a sudden and unforeseen difficulty with a foreign power), she moved about restlessly, paying little heed to the remarks which were addressed to her from time to time, and throwing frequent impatient glances at the dark corner where Strahan could be discerned, bending over a little figure in a white gown and partially concealed by an enormous fan composed of black ostrich feathers. What business had he to possess himself of Betty's fan? What right had he to make the girl and himself conspicuous by retiring into so inconspicuous a spot? Such behaviour was, to say the least of it, in very bad taste, and, should it be persisted with, something might, perhaps, have to be said to him upon the subject. Marietta could not but remember that her sister-in-law was, for the time being, under her protection.

She would have been reassured if she had heard the conversation which was being carried on under circumstances suggestive of something altogether different from the actual relations which subsisted between the talkers. Betty, to whom this man, whom she rather liked and admired a good deal, would have been no more conceivable as a lover than the Reverend Mr. Grace, was lamenting her imminent departure—not, as she frankly owned, because she was about to leave anybody to whom she was profoundly attached behind her, but because it was only too probable that she would get no more hunting that season.

"I shall go out with the harriers sometimes from Chelton," she said; "but that can't be called hunting; one might almost as well go out on foot."

"Then why don't you stay where you are?" asked Strahan.

"I have a granny who requires looking after. Besides, Lionel is too fond of filling his house with smart people for my taste. If Mr. St. Quintin had been coming, I would have tried to stretch a point; but he writes to say that he can't be spared—which is very aggravating of him. You were at Oxford with him and Lionel, weren't you? I hope you like him as much as I do."

"Well," answered Strahan, "I dare say I should like him better if he didn't, unfortunately, happen to cherish a strong dislike for me."

"Does he dislike you?" asked Betty, opening her blue eyes in astonishment; "why should he do that, I wonder? Are you sure he dislikes you?"

"I am afraid there can't be a doubt of it."

"Dear me! I am sorry to hear that. Because it shows that you must have done something to deserve it."

Strahan laughed. "I congratulate St. Quintin," said he.

"Oh, he has his faults; he and I don't invariably hit it off together. Still I shall always stand up for him behind his back, and I hope he will always stand up for me. That is my idea of friendship."

It was at this juncture that Marietta, whose patience was exhausted, thought fit to interrupt a colloquy which had been somewhat more protracted than has been reported above.

"Miss Mallet," said Strahan, looking up with a smile, "has been giving her definition of friendship for my benefit. It is an essential condition, as I understand, that one shall think no evil of one's friends."

"Then one's friends must not give one cause to think ill of them," returned Marietta rather sharply. "But

I doubt, after all, whether there can really be such a thing as friendship between a man and a woman."

Strahan raised his eyebrows. "Isn't that rather a recent discovery on your part, Lady Middlewood?" he made so bold as to inquire.

She shrugged her shoulders. "One lives and learns. Betty, won't you go and join those gamblers? They want somebody to fill up a place."

Betty had no objection; and Marietta, after watching her seat herself at the round table, moved slowly away. Did she expect to be followed? If so, she was disappointed; for Strahan, though much tempted to obey what had very much the appearance of an unspoken invitation, decided in favour of prudence.

"It won't do," he said to himself; "complications of that sort would never do! Besides, if she is angry, it isn't so much because she is jealous as because she is vain and greedy, I suspect. Good heavens! What adjectives to apply to the most charming woman of my acquaintance! All the same, I shouldn't wonder if she was right in denying the possibility of friendship between her sex and mine."

CHAPTER XXI

THE RECALCITRANT PRINCESS.

"So far so good," remarked Betty, in a satisfied tone of voice, as she folded up a bulky epistle which she had been perusing at the breakfast-table.

"What is good?" asked her brother.

"Only the news that I have just had from granny. She writes at great length to announce that old Grace is about to contract a second marriage. I dare say you don't remember Miss Stepney."

"I remember a grim maiden lady, reputed to be very well off and very pious, who used to establish herself in the neighbourhood of Chelton during the summer months and whom I sometimes saw sketching under a big umbrella. You surely don't mean——"

"Oh, yes, I do, and I consider it a very suitable arrangement. Indeed, I may say that I have had some hand in bringing matters to a head. All through the autumn I acted as a benevolent intermediary between these two young things, representing that each was pining for the other, but was withheld by native modesty. Now it appears that Grace has been down to Kent, where Selina (her name is Selina) resides, and has declared his passion. Granny says that in the whole course of a long life she has never heard of anything so flagrantly indecent. She can but trust that Mr. Grace, having secured the means of living in idleness for the rest of his days, will see the propriety of resigning a benefice where his continued ministrations would be nothing short of a public scandal. I trust also that he will, and what is more, I fully expect him to do so; for he is a self-indulgent old wretch, and the climate of Derbyshire doesn't agree with him."

Lionel laughed. "After all," said he, "if the two persons principally concerned are satisfied, I don't know why anybody else should object."

"Nor do I, dear boy: on the contrary, as I tell you, I myself cordially approve. But granny objects so strongly, and she has such a strong method of making her objections known, that I think I may look forward to a speedy deliverance from the old gentleman's scandalous ministrations. It was only a chance shot," continued Betty musingly; "but it has come off, thank Heaven! Now one will have to be very careful about Grace's successor, or one may find that one has only fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire. The hypocrisy of the Evangelical school being laid bare, you see, the thing to do will be to enlist granny's sympathies on the side of muscular Christianity. A sporting parson would give me no trou-

ble and would be popular in the parish. Well, I must get home and see about it all—especially as granny's letter contains an urgent summons. She says she has been so upset that she really is not fit to be alone any longer."

Marietta did not join in her husband's hospitable protests: although she might have done so with a clear conscience, inasmuch as it presently transpired that Mr. Strahan, too, found it imperative upon him to bring his brief visit to a close. Matters of business, of which he had been informed by post, demanded his immediate return to London, it seemed. The troubled aspect of foreign affairs had disturbed the money market, he explained, and for many reasons it was considered desirable that he should be upon the spot.

He explained nothing else, nor was he invited to do so. If Marietta wished him to be explicit upon any other subject, she betrayed no such wish, and he took leave of her without the slightest reference, on his side or on hers, to the friendly compact which neither of them had repudiated. The only approach to an indiscretion that he permitted himself was at the last moment, when he said amiably:

"I am so glad to have had this glimpse of you in your newly acquired condition of absolute contentment. You will have plenty of people here to amuse you all through the winter, I have no doubt, and in any case, as you pointed out the other day, you will always have your husband and the baby."

He meant, of course, that these were unlikely to suffice for any great length of time; and the worst of it was that he was right! She was fain to admit as much to herself very soon after his departure, and the fact of having to make that admission renewed the feeling of dull irritation against the man which for a good many weeks past she had been more or less successful in stifling. Why should she care if the unfortunate fact that she was dissatisfied was no secret to him? What did it signify whether he understood her or not? Why had

she ever given him the right to make speeches which bordered upon impertinence? At all events—setting Mr. Strahan and his speeches and opinions aside—there was no holding out against the impatient weariness which was once more taking possession of her. Lionel's hunting friends were not amusing, and it was useless to go on pretending that they were; Ludworth might be better than Middlewood, but it was not a particularly lively place of residence in mid-winter for people who did not hunt: in short, Marietta thought that she required a change, and her medical attendant was so accommodating as to agree with her.

That amiable gentleman (who may have received some prompting from his patient) said that, while he did not feel justified in positively ordering such a thing, he was of opinion that a trip abroad would be highly beneficial to her ladyship. There would be no risk at all in leaving the baby, for the supply of whose immediate wants the services of competent persons had been secured, and what he should be inclined to recommend would be either the Riviera or Italy until—say, Easter.

It must be owned that Lionel looked a little dismayed when this bland advice was addressed to him. To ask him to sacrifice the remainder of the hunting season, not to mention the numerous political and other engagements which he had formed, was to ask rather more than a trifle; still he replied that he would, of course, be guided by his wife's wishes in the matter, and his wife, when consulted, stated her wishes without ambiguity.

"I have never been to Rome," she said, "and one must see Rome some time or other. Don't you think that this is about as good an opportunity as we shall get? I mean, we shall probably be less free after we are out of mourning, and you will dislike the idea of leaving England just as much next year or the year after as you do now."

"Oh, I'm not such an inveterate John Bull as all that," answered Lionel, manfully endeavouring to appear more cheerful than he felt. "Besides, it's a question of

pleasing you, not me. We'll make it Rome, then. As far as that goes, I didn't half see the place when I was there with St. Quintin."

Nobody will ever see again the unique and beloved city which the name of Rome represents in the memories of some of us who are no longer young; but there remains, of course, a great deal in the capital of modern Italy, which human ingenuity can neither vulgarise nor destroy, and it is certain that travellers so advantageously equipped as Lord and Lady Middlewood can amuse themselves very well there. Lent fell late that year, and carnival gaieties were in full swing when they reached the spacious quarters which had been secured for them in a recently erected hotel. Introductions they scarcely required; still they had armed themselves with a few, addressed to the principal Italian families; so that they soon found it expedient to postpone systematic sight-seeing to a quieter season. Marietta's success was immediate and unbounded. Her fluent Italian stood her in good stead, her singing—nobody in Rome had ever heard an Englishwoman sing like that—evoked enthusiastic applause, while her beauty was the theme of universal comment and admiration. All this afforded her, for the time being, genuine delight. At last it seemed to her that some of the glittering visions in which she had indulged before her marriage were being fulfilled, and she lost that sense of having been somehow defrauded which had haunted her in England. Perhaps foreigners, and even English people abroad, are more demonstrative than frequenters of London society; perhaps her health, her spirits and her beauty alike benefited by the glorious weather which chanced to prevail; perhaps, too, she was not insensible to the joy of so triumphant a return to a country which had lately known—or rather ignored—her as a poor, insignificant and friendless child. She came across one or two of her former schoolmates, quiet little *principesse*, and *contesse*, who seemed to be fairly dazzled by the magnificence and to whom she could not resist extending a somewhat patronising recognition.

If, as was probable, her unusual familiarity with the language caused any inquiries to be set on foot respecting her origin, these were not reported to her; for the rest, she would have been very willing, if interrogated, to furnish information upon the subject. Indeed, she was not without hope that she might, sooner or later, encounter some member of the well-known family to which her mother had belonged. Her mother's family, she presumed, would hardly be disposed to look down upon her now. She was, therefore, much pleased when, at a ball at the Quirinal, an olive-complexioned young officer of cavalry was led up to her and presented under the name of Count Ettore Magliacci.

"We ought to know each other," said she, smiling upon him, "for I think we must be related. Had you not an aunt, or perhaps a cousin, who married Colonel Vigne, of the Austrian army?"

The young man shook his head. He did not think so; although it was needless for him to say that he would count it a high privilege to be connected, even distantly, with Lady Middlewood. The Magliacci, he added, were a somewhat numerous clan, and it was possible that the late Mrs. Vigne had belonged to some branch of it with which he was not acquainted. In any case, he would not fail to ask his mother, who had the whole family history at her fingers' ends.

"Your mother is in Rome, then?" asked Marietta.

"For the moment, yes; but she is old and in infirm health; she goes very little into the world. I am sure, however, that if you would deign to call upon her in her little apartment, she would feel much honoured, Lady Middlewood."

He was a pleasant-mannered young man, and Marietta liked him so much that she danced three times with him. He, on his side, made no secret of his eagerness to pursue an acquaintance so auspiciously begun; he wrote down his mother's address on a card, and jumped at the informal invitation to luncheon with which he was favoured.

But when, as the result of that invitation, he presented himself at the hotel a few days later, it was evident that something had occurred during the interval to modify the first warmth of his sentiments. Charmingly polite and amiable though he was (and no people in the world can be so charming or so polite as Italians) a certain embarrassment was perceptible in his manner, and he dwelt with rather uncalled for emphasis upon the unfortunate circumstances that his mother's delicate health prevented her from receiving any visitors, save a few old friends.

"Was she able to identify me?" Marietta asked.

"*Ma sicuro!—sicuro!*" answered the young man hastily, "Mrs. Vigne, it appears, was a younger sister of my father's. But my father has been dead for many years—and she also, is it not so? It all happened a very long time ago, and I believe my mother never had the pleasure of being personally acquainted with yours."

Then he turned to Lionel and began to talk very fast in broken English about fox-hunting. Had Lord Middlewood ever been out with the hounds on the Campagna? It was doubtless not to be compared with the same sport as obtainable in England; still there were many who delighted in it, and for his own part, he thought it great fun. Only, as he could not afford to keep horses of his own, he had to make the best of hired ones; so that he was apt to be left behind in a quick run. He addressed his conversation almost exclusively to his host, notwithstanding the difficulty that he experienced in expressing himself, and he departed at length without having delivered any message to his first cousin from a lady who had apparently owned to being her aunt.

"That is a nice, manly fellow," remarked Lionel, after he had taken his leave.

But Marietta, who was frowning and looked annoyed, did not respond. Presently she said: "His mother does not wish to know us."

"Doesn't she? Well, I suppose we are not precisely

in a fever of anxiety to know her," returned Lionel philosophically. "She is an invalid, he said; very likely she doesn't want to be bothered with strangers."

Marietta shook her head. "It isn't that; if I am her niece, I am scarcely a stranger—or, at all events, I ought not to be. Papa has always refused to make any advances to these people; for in his own way he is just as proud as they are, and I can understand his having felt that it was for them to take the first step. But now that I am—what I am, I should have thought they would be only too glad to claim relationship with us."

"H'm!—— well, it isn't particularly important, is it?" said Lionel.

She made an impatient gesture. "Oh, not to you! Nothing is important to you, except racing and hunting and shooting and political squabbles. But to me, it does seem rather important that I should be first welcomed by my relations and then given to understand that they would rather not have anything to do with me. I don't know whether to call or not."

"I hardly think I should call, if I were you; but suppose you wait until you father comes and consult him?" suggested Lionel.

Colonel Vigne, who had been spending a part of the winter at Trieste, had been begged to join his daughter and her husband, and was expected to arrive shortly. What his advice would be Marietta could easily guess; and perhaps that was why she decided to have herself driven, the next afternoon, to the address given her by Count Ettore. She was kept waiting a long time at the door, and was then informed that the Principesse did not receive. On the following day a servant left the Principessa Magliacci's card at the hotel—which certainly seemed to be, as Marietta angrily declared that it was, conclusive.

"Perhaps it is," agreed Lionel; "but what then? I should think we might continue to find existence endurable without this good lady."

"But it is an insult!—a positive insult!" cried Mari-

etta. "Is it really nothing to you that your wife should be insulted?"

But Lionel could not be induced to regard the incident seriously. When his wife was insulted, he said, it would be time enough for him to arm himself to the teeth and sally forth to do battle with Count Ettore or some older member of the Magliacci family; but he was quite sure that nobody had intended to be insulting. An old woman, who had never met the late Mrs. Vigne, was not inclined to emerge from the seclusion in which she lived; that was all. Perhaps, at the bottom of his heart, he thought, as Marietta did, that nobody could wish to inflict an actual snub upon so exalted a personage as Lady Middlewood.

But Colonel Vigne, when he arrived, and was told what had taken place, was of a different opinion. The old gentleman was a good deal vexed, and did not conceal from his daughter that, by his way of thinking, she had gratuitously exposed herself to a rebuff.

"My dear child, have I not always warned you that they are irreconcilable, those people! Surely it would have been very easy and very simple to take no notice of them."

Nevertheless, he himself saw fit to take some notice of them; for he lost no time in calling upon the Princess, and had a rather protracted interview with that lady, the result of which was that he returned to the hotel, bringing what, with a little manipulation, might be made to do duty for an apology.

"I am to say," he told Marietta, "that your aunt is living in complete retirement, that she expects to leave Rome shortly, and that she has for a long time past felt compelled to decline making any additions to her visiting-list. She hopes, therefore, that you will acquit her of intentional discourtesy, and—and I believe she said something about wishing you well."

"I can't imagine a more impertinent message!" exclaimed Marietta. "She wishes me well!—why, that is the sort of thing that one would say to a dismissed servant!

In plain words, what she means is that she looks down upon us."

Colonel Vigne shrugged his shoulders; he confessed that that might very possibly be the Princess's meaning. "I am not of the rank of the Magliacci; I never pretended to be; and when your poor mother married me—well, she forfeited the position to which she was born."

"That may be," returned Marietta a little inconsiderately; "but at least they cannot deny that Lionel is their equal in rank and position. And I am Lionel's wife."

The Colonel's shoulders were once more jerked eloquently upwards. "What would you have, my dear? It is the privilege of decayed nobility to be proud and prejudiced. The young man, as I understand, is under no prohibition with regard to visiting you or accepting your hospitality, and as for the old woman, it seems to me that you can very well afford to dispense with the society of one old woman, considering how eager all the other great people in Rome are to pay court to you."

It betrayed an imperfect acquaintance with Marietta's character to assume that she would willingly dispense with anything, whether intrinsically desirable or not, which was refused to her; and, as a fact, this slight, which did not disturb her husband's equanimity for a moment, sufficed to embitter for her the remainder of her sojourn in the Italian capital. She fancied (quite mistakenly) that everybody had heard of it; she detected a hint of discomfort and deprecation in the mien of Count Ettore, whom she met from time to time; she perceived that it was not quite enough—although, in all conscience, it ought to have been enough!—to be Viscountess Middlewood and to have a magnificent voice. And this rendered her so irritable and hard to please that poor Colonel Vigne, who was more often in her company than Lionel, was not sorry to hear her announce abruptly, one morning, that she was sick of Rome.

"Why should we not go to Sorrento or Amalfi for Lent?" she asked. "We have seen almost everything

that there is to be seen here, and it will be so dull when all the entertainments come to an end."

Lionel cheerfully acquiesced. He had not come abroad to please himself, and he asked nothing better than to please his wife, should that prove to be within the range of his capacity.

"You are very kind and very indulgent," his father-in-law said to him apologetically. "It is necessary to show great kindness and forbearance to women, if you will allow an old fellow who has seen something of life to say so, and you will have your reward in the long run."

But the worthy Colonel's views of life were those of a man, and he did not realise that, whereas the masculine tendency is always to judge others by what they do rather than by what they say, the feminine is precisely the reverse. That may have been why Marietta had no thanks to bestow upon a husband who sometimes refused, but more often granted her requests, without waste of words.

CHAPTER XXII.

"SCANDALOUS CONDUCT."

"I SUPPOSE," said Betty, "you have heard about granny?"

"I have heard," answered Marietta, "that she has taken a house in Chesham-place for the season, and that she intends to celebrate your *début* by entertaining a good deal in what she calls 'a quiet way.'"

"Oh, that's of course. She had no alternative—or, at least, she said she hadn't—and I dare say she wasn't very anxious to discover one. What I meant to ask was whether you had heard of the change in her religious views?"

Marietta shook her head; no intimation upon that subject had reached her.

"Well, I am glad to tell you that she is now an advanced Ritualist. Granny never does things by halves, and Grace's immoral conduct in espousing a rich old spinster having convinced her that the Evangelical party is no good, she has gone over, bag and baggage, to the opposite camp. Grace, as I knew he would, has resigned, and in his place we have got a nice little shaveling, whose sermons never last more than ten minutes. All through Lent we fasted royally upon ingenious arrangements of fish and eggs, and now we have the sanction of the Church to kick up our heels to any extent. As I say, I am glad of the change for many reasons. Personally, I enjoy an ornate service, and it is an immense comfort to granny to feel that she is only fulfilling the duties that belong to her station by giving frequent little dinners and attending them."

It was in Arlington-street, whither Lord and Lady Middlewood had just returned from abroad, that the above announcement respecting the conversion of a notable personage to the precepts and practices of orthodoxy was made. It scarcely lay in the mouth of Marietta, whose own conversion from Romanism to Anglicanism was, as we know, of comparatively recent date, to express any disapproval thereof. She merely remarked:

"You are both to be congratulated then. Oh, how I should congratulate myself if I could change places with you, Betty!"

"You would, would you? I wonder why!" said the young lady.

"Partly because you are so free and so pretty and so charmingly dressed; partly because you only want the things which you are quite sure to get; but, most of all, because you are evidently enjoying, and going to enjoy, your season to the full."

"I certainly mean to enjoy myself as much as I can," returned Betty. "Up to the present I have done fairly well; though there have been experiences—one's presenta-

tion, for instance—which haven't been an unmixed delight, and I can't say that I altogether look forward to spending the best part of the summer amongst bricks and mortar. Still, if this sort of thing is to be done at all, it had better be done at a time of year when there is no sport to be had. Thank you for calling me pretty and praising my clothes. It isn't everybody who is so complimentary, I can tell you."

It did not seem very likely that many people could be found in London to dispute the claims of this azure-eyed, clear-complexioned and graceful little lady to be considered pretty, nor was it the fault of the best dressmaker in that city if her half-mourning costumes failed to excite admiration.

"I should like to know who ventures to be uncomplimentary to you," said Marietta, smiling.

"Well, there is Mr. St. Quintin, who has a wonderful gift of eloquent silence, and there is your friend Mr. Strahan, who was so kind as to point out to me the other day that my hands are irretrievably sunburnt up to the wrists—the result of having gone about without gloves in all weathers since my puppyhood. Clara Gosport also says that my attitudes are ungainly. There's no pleasing everybody, is there?"

Apparently there was a momentary difficulty in pleasing Lady Middlewood, whose countenance had clouded over a little at the sound of one of the above-mentioned names. However, it was in a voice which expressed no displeasure and only a touch of curiosity that she said: "You see Mr. Strahan then? I have heard nothing of him for a long time."

"So he told me; he wanted to know whether you were coming to London at all. Yes, one meets him every now and then, and one is always being questioned about him. It seems that a lot of people expect him to make their fortunes for them. Granny thinks of buying some shares in his company, but she says that 'her poor, dear Halsted,' as she always calls him, implored her with his dying breath to beware of specula-

tive investments; so she felt it due to the memory of the departed to take no step until you came back from abroad and she could consult Lionel. What made you stay away such a long time?"

Marietta really could not say. Her sojourn on the southern shores of Italy had afforded her no particular pleasure, and a brief second visit to Rome at Easter had so far partaken of the nature of a disappointment that it had not brought about that meeting with the Princess Magliacci, upon whom she had rather perversely set her heart. Yet she had persuaded her husband, a good deal against his will, to postpone their return home until nearly the end of May. Her infant son had been despatched to meet his parents in Paris, where they had spent several weeks, and even now it was scarcely by her own wish that she was in Arlington-street.

"I hate doing things all over again," she said, by way of a partial explanation, "and I saw almost all that there was to be seen of a London season last year. But nothing would induce Lionel to absent himself from the Derby; so here we are."

That Lionel had declared it imperative upon him to attend the Epsom summer meeting was true enough, but Marietta's assertion that a single season had sufficed to gratify her whilom yearnings after social celebrity seemed to lack verisimilitude. However, it was not challenged by Betty, who may have been rather more interested for the moment in the celebrity which she herself was rapidly acquiring than in that of anybody else. The Honourable Betty was, indeed, in a fair way to become very widely known, and that not so much by reason of her fortune or her personal attractions as of what, even in these advanced days, were held to be barely admissible eccentricities of speech and action.

"Does one," Lady Gosport had almost tearfully demanded of her that very morning—"I ask you, *does* one exercise young horses in the Row at unheard-of hours, without a chaperon or even a groom? And *is* one seen at prize-fights?"

"One makes so bold as to ride one's own horse when one doesn't want his mouth to be ruined by a mutton-fisted groom," was Betty's reply. "As for the glove-fight which you call a prize-fight, I was present at it under proper chaperonage, and I am very glad to have seen it."

"It cannot have been anything but a disgusting exhibition, and you were there, I hear, with that horrible Rushcliffe woman. If you call her proper!—"

"I don't know much about Lady Rushcliffe," Betty coolly confessed; "she looks rather improper, I must say, but she is a good-natured woman. And there wasn't anybody else to take me, you see."

Lady Gosport could but throw up her hands and wonder what in the world Aunt Maria was thinking about: to which Betty answered concisely, "Altar-frontals and chasubles. Granny is a happy old child; for she has got a new toy."

It is only fair to Lady Maria to say that she was thinking a good deal about her granddaughter, as well as about the fashionable church which she now frequented, and that she had not been informed of that surreptitious patronage of pugilism. She was doing her duty as conscientiously as her years and her notions of its nature enabled her to do it; but she was physically incapacitated from keeping a constant eye upon the restless Betty, and, having for a long time been virtually under the latter's domination, she had not always the courage to ask direct questions. In a word, she was old, she valued peace, and there were things to which she was not unwilling to close her eyes and ears. A brilliant marriage, followed by a speedy abatement of youthful impetuosity and insubordination, was what she confidently looked forward to for her charge. In the meantime, she resumed (with no great reluctance) the jewels and the gay apparel which her former spiritual advisers had prevailed upon her to discard, and responded to a fair proportion of the very numerous invitations that were despatched to Chesham-place.

It was at a large reception at the Foreign Office, one evening, shortly after the return of the Middlewoods, that she caught sight of a young man for whom she had always entertained kindly feelings, and beckoned to him with her fan.

"How do you do, Mr. St. Quintin?" said she, when he had approached, in deference to her signal. "If you have nothing else for Thursday next, and if you aren't too proud to fill up a place which has fallen vacant, will you come and dine? You will meet Lionel and his wife, if that is any inducement."

"It will be an additional, but quite unnecessary one," answered St. Quintin, smiling. "You need never be afraid that I shall be too proud to accept an invitation from you, Lady Maria."

"Very kind of you to say so, I'm sure. Well, we are always glad to see you, and I do believe that if anybody can influence that rampageous grandchild of mine, you can."

St. Quintin, looking a little grave, said he could hardly flatter himself that that was the case.

"Oh, she quotes you. Not invariably with respect, I am bound to say; still she does repeat the sage advice which you appear to give her from time to time, and I notice that she sometimes follows it. Now, tell me honestly—because I want to have an honest opinion about it, and I don't care to consult everybody—is Betty what you would call a fast girl?"

"She certainly is not what *I* should call a fast girl," answered St. Quintin; "but since you ask me, I think there is some danger of other people calling her so. Some of her friends, you see, are rather—well, I don't quite know how to describe them without giving offence."

"My dear man, you wouldn't offend my ears if you described some of them in the crudest language," said Lady Maria; and to prove the sincerity of her assertion, she proceeded to make statements respecting several well-known ladies which might have laid her open to an action for slander. "But what is one to do?" she con-

cluded; "one must take the world as one finds it, and nobody in his senses expects to find it a foretaste of Heaven. Besides, most of these people, after all, are regular attendants at St. Winifred's."

"St. Winifred's," observed St. Quintin, "is a very fashionable church. I have heard it said that some ladies make use of St. Winifred's for purposes which can scarcely be called devotional."

Lady Maria burst out laughing. "That is quite abominable of them!" she declared. "To convert a church into a place of assignation—for I suppose that is what you mean—is, of course, to commit a deadly sin. At the same time, you know, there really ought to be some way of reconciling one's religion with one's social obligations, just as there ought to be (and I believe there is) some simple method of squashing scientific doubt. In former years I lived quite apart from the world; but everybody can't do that, and, under existing circumstances, I myself can't. So you see!"

"I quite see," replied St. Quintin gravely, "that St. Winifred's supplies a much nedded compromise."

"Well, yes; I think it does. And we are bound to judge our neighbours as charitably as we can. And as for Betty, she will probably be a married woman before she is much older—which will solve all difficulties."

St. Quintin signified assent; although he was not sure that the solution of all difficulties is a necessary result of marriage. As he passed out, he had a glimpse of Miss Mallet, encircled by gilded youths, with whom she was talking and laughing rather loudly, and he said to himself, with a sigh, that at all events the child Betty was quite dead and gone. What the woman was going to be like remained an open question. Unwelcome odds and ends of gossip had reached his ears, and it occurred to him that, now Lionel had returned, a word or two might be whispered to the head of the family respecting these.

The discharge of a somewhat delicate office of friendship was rendered easy for him, a few days later, by

Lionel's introducing the subject of his own initiative. They were walking across the Horse Guards' Parade together, on their way to keep an appointment with St. Quintin's chief, who wished to consult Lord Middlewood with regard to certain additions to the magisterial bench in the county of which he had succeeded his father as lord-lieutenant, when Lionel said:

"I am beginning to be a bit uneasy about that young sister of mine. From what I hear, I am afraid she is getting herself mixed up with a rather rapid set; but of course, next to my grandmother, I am the last person in London who is likely to be told the truth. Do you happen to know anything?"

St. Quintin happened to know a good deal; but he hastened to add, after stating what he knew, that he was sure Miss Mallet did not herself realise the necessary results of her imprudences.

"She has been practically her own mistress all her life, I take it," he said, "and probably she doesn't see why things which can be done with safety in one place can't be done in another. If all men were gentlemen and good fellows, there would be no need to put her on her guard; but, as you know, plenty of men who ought to be both are neither."

The enunciation of this deplorable, but undeniable fact brought them into Whitehall, where, as chance would have it, St. Quintin's interference with other people's business was justified after an abrupt and dramatic fashion. For whom should their astonished eyes behold, driving a pair of fiery chestnuts in a mail-phaeton up that thoroughfare, but Miss Betty in person! And by her side was seated precisely one of those young dogs (Lord Charles Jocelyn by name) to whom the above unflattering description might be held, without gross calumny, to apply. Now, as both the horses and the equipage in question were the property of Lord Middlewood, it was scarcely to be wondered at that he should dart out into the roadway, holding up his hand and at

the same time giving vent to an exclamation more forcible than pious.

Betty made a grimace at her companion and pulled up. "Don't excite yourself," she called out to her brother; "it's all right. I found out at the stables that the horses were going to be exercised anyhow; so I thought they might as well be exercised by me as by anybody else. And they have been going as quietly as two little sheep, you will be glad to hear."

"This mustn't happen again, please," returned Lionel curtly. "You are welcome to the use of any horses of mine if you let me know beforehand, and if they are fit for you to drive; but these are not, and you won't drive them another yard. I am afraid I must ask you to get down, Jocelyn," he added, turning to the young man, of whose affable greeting he had taken no notice; "I will take my sister home. I'll meet you at the Home Office in less than half-an-hour, St. Quintin."

Lord Charles, a slim, good-looking youth, whose imperturbability no earthly power could shake, stood for a moment on the pavement, gazing after the rapidly retreating vehicle. "Poor Betty!" he remarked; "she is going to catch it now."

"I don't know what business you have to call Miss Mallet Betty," said St. Quintin.

"She always calls me Charlie," answered the other, with mild ingenuousness.

"Does she, indeed?" returned the irate St. Quintin. "Then all I can say is I hope she *is* going to catch it!"

That his hope was fulfilled he was speedily destined to learn from the lips of Betty herself, who, on the occasion of the dinner-party in Chesham-place, to which he had been bidden, led him aside and announced that she had a crow to pluck with him.

"What do you mean," she asked, "by egging Lionel on to abuse me like a pickpocket?"

"Surely no egging-on was required," answered St. Quintin. "If taking a man's horses out of his stables,

without leave given or asked, isn't much the same thing as picking his pocket, I don't know what is."

"Oh, I am not speaking about the horses. Of course I ought not to have taken them, and I begged his pardon. But what I was scolded for was scandalous conduct —yes 'scandalous conduct' in so many words, neither more nor less; and it appeared that you, of all people, had been the one to inform against me. Now, I tell you plainly that I don't call that sort of thing either friendly or straightforward."

St. Quintin was sorry, but must decline to apologise. He had said nothing behind Miss Mallet's back, he declared, that he would hesitate to say to her face; and, to prove that this was no vain boast, he went on to say things which had the effect of bringing a fine access of colour into the face alluded to. To drive about with young men—especially such young men as Lord Charles Jocelyn—and to call them by their Christian names was very nearly being scandalous; to make a friend of Lady Rushcliffe was little, if at all, better—and so on, by the space of five minutes, at the expiration of which time he became aware that he was in the presence of a very angry young lady indeed.

"Anything more?" he was asked, when he had made an end of speaking.

"Nothing, except that I hope you will learn in time who your real friends are, and that it isn't for their own satisfaction that they incur your displeasure."

"It strikes me," said Betty, "that I know pretty well already who my real friends are, and I can't include you amongst them, Mr. St. Quintin. I don't mind your being rather a prig; perhaps that isn't your fault. But I don't feel inclined to forgive you for thinking so badly of me upon such slight provocation. However, you must think what you please; you may be sure that neither you nor anybody else will prevent me from doing just exactly what *I* please."

And with that, she turned her back upon him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARIETTA BECOMES RESTIVE.

MARIETTA, seated upon a sofa in the scantily furnished drawing-room of Lady Maria's hired residence, and gazing over the head of the estimable elderly nobleman who was doing his best to entertain her, was a faintly amused spectator of poor St. Quintin's discomfiture. Having watched him while he dejectedly made for his hostess, and having heard him plead great pressure of work as an excuse for immediate departure, she rose and joined Betty, upon whose cheeks the flush of battle still glowed.

"What has that unfortunate man been doing to you?" she asked. "It is easy to see what you have been doing to him."

"What I maintain," answered the girl, without much apparent relevance, "is that it doesn't matter a straw what stupid and ill-natured people may choose to say about one. I am responsible to my own conscience, not to them, and so long as my conscience doesn't accuse me, it's little enough I care whether they shriek at me or hold their tongues."

"Mr. St. Quintin has abandoned the eloquent silence that you spoke of the other day, then?"

"Oh, yes; and I must say that speech is a good deal less becoming to him. All the same, I dare say he means well; the most infuriating people almost always do mean well. Perhaps I oughtn't to have snapped his nose off—though he got no more than his deserts."

"His nose will grow again," said Marietta; "it is essential to his existence. Mr. St. Quintin couldn't live without a nose to thrust into his neighbour's business. It has been so often thrust into mine that I can't see it nipped without some little satisfaction."

"Oh, he isn't a busybody," returned Betty, who, however incensed she might be against her friends, did

not care to hear them spoken ill of by any one else. "He has his faults—and tolerably glaring they are, some of them!—but I believe him when he says that it gives him no pleasure to tell me of mine."

"It is extremely impertinent on his part to allude to your faults. What are they, according to him?"

Betty could not resist relating the whole story. It was all very well, she said in conclusion, to blame girls for flirting—a vulgar practice which she herself despised and never indulged in—but reasonable beings ought to have some sort of discrimination. Was it likely that she would have publicly exhibited herself in a mail-phaeton with Charlie Jocelyn unless she had had a good reason for so doing? What had actually happened was that she had overtaken him in the Buckingham palace-road and had asked him to jump up, because she rather wanted to have somebody beside her, in case of accidents.

"I don't mind telling you that I found those chestnuts rather a handful, and Charlie, though he is an idiot in many ways, does know how to drive. But I really begin to think that ninety-nine men out of a hundred are idiots where women are concerned. I make an exception in favour of Mr. Strahan, who not only knows how to ride and drive, but looks at things from a common-sense point of view. To be sure, he isn't a lady's man."

He seemed to be so little of a lady's man that he had not yet been at the pains of calling upon a lady whose devoted friend he had once proclaimed himself. The mention of his name caused Marietta's brows to contract. Brought up, as she had been, in accordance with foreign ideas, Betty's proceedings certainly struck her as quite inadmissible; but she had refrained from expressing disapproval, partly because she liked the girl, and partly because she did not wish to share in St. Quintin's condemnation. That Strahan should be proving his common sense by maintaining, as he appeared to be doing, relations of intimacy with the young heiress was, however, an unwelcome piece of intelligence to her.

"Mr. Strahan has evidently made a great impression

upon you," she remarked. "What does Lady Maria think of him?"

"Granny?—oh, he stands very high in her good graces. As I told you, she hasn't quite made up her mind yet to trust him with her money; but she probably will before long, and she has the greatest admiration for his talents. He is going to be a very big man one of these days, she says, and I believe Mr. Sitwell, who ought to know, agrees with her."

"He will be a big man, I dare say," remarked Marietta. "Perhaps it isn't quite so certain that he is to be implicitly trusted."

She said no more at the time; but her doubt as to Mr. Strahan's complete trustworthiness—or some other motive—led her to ask her husband, while they were driving home, whether he thought it altogether wise of Lady Maria to encourage the visits of the rising celebrity.

"He is your friend, of course," she observed; "but I should think he is hardly the sort of person whom you would select to be your brother-in-law."

Lionel was much amused. "What an extraordinary notion to have taken into your head!" he exclaimed. "Betty has shown some disposition to play the fool of late, it is true, and I have had to give her a wigging about it; but she is in no danger, that I can see or hear, of contracting a precipitate marriage, and most assuredly she is no more dreaming of Strahan that he is of her. Strahan, I imagine, has other things to think about. Besides, he owns to being a bit of a woman-hater."

Strahan's behaviour certainly lent some confirmation to that view of him; for every day Lady Middlewood examined the cards on the hall table without discovering his amongst them. Her odd, restless jealousy—jealousy of a man for whom she often said to herself that her feeling was one of interest and curiosity much more than of liking—was to some extent allayed by what Lionel had said, and to a still greater extent by what she heard from others of his absorption in matters of politics and finance.

Nevertheless, his marked and persistent neglect did not fail to hurt her pride. He often saw her husband, it appeared; but that ordinary politeness required him to call in Arlington-street had evidently not occurred to him. And when at last the long delayed cards did meet her eye, on her return home one afternoon, her displeasure was increased rather than diminished. If he had not called at all, there might conceivably have been some cause for the omission which he would have been able to explain; but this tardy recognition of what was civil and customary could only mean that he had hitherto been too busy or too lazy to do his duty.

It so happened that no immediate opportunity came to her of manifesting her displeasure to the delinquent. She went out a great deal, and so, by all accounts, did he; but their paths did not chance to cross, nor indeed was there any particular reason why they should: everybody must have noticed that in large, and even in small, cities such encounters occur by runs, like the red and the black at Monte Carlo, and one may spend a whole season in London without once meeting this or that person who turned up with monotonous regularity last year.

For the rest, this third London season of hers represented little but monotony and satiety to Marietta. She was so constituted that something in the nature of a struggle was essential to her happiness, and so situated that no field of rivalry or competition lay open to her. Most women in her place would have endeavoured to become leaders of fashion; but she was for many reasons ill equipped to undertake that part, and she was conscious of being appreciably less noticed and courted, now that she had mounted several steps on the social ladder. The truth was that she had taken no great trouble to make herself popular, while she had ceased to be a novelty. She was simply the beautiful Lady Middlewood, a woman more agreeable to look at than to converse with, and possessed of a fine voice, which she had capriciously declined of late to place at the disposal of organisers of charity concerts. There were, of course, plenty of

people who were delighted to know her and to accept her husband's hospitality: but she was without special distinction, nor did she appear to covet any.

As a matter of fact, she coveted nothing so much, unless it were attention, flattery, affection. Of these desirable things she did not think that she received her fair share from Lionel, who had once more become involved and engrossed in politics, and to whom it was generally believed that office in some shape or form would be offered ere long. As for her infant son—well, she had spasmodic fits of tenderness for him; but the circumstance that he was cutting his teeth rendered his society a little trying, and upon the whole it seemed best not to interfere too much with his nurse—a stately and peremptory personage. Perhaps it is rather more difficult for the rich than for the poor to become attached to their helpless, but troublesome offspring. And so, to sum up, Marietta was rather badly in want of a friend—were it only a false and fickle one, who might at least be made to serve the humble purpose of a scapegoat.

Now it came to pass, one fine afternoon, that she was leaving the Park by the Grosvenor Gate entrance when her carriage was brought to a momentary standstill by the traffic in Park Lane, and thus a gentleman who was walking briskly in the same direction caught sight of her and, without waiting to be recognised, held out his hand, while he removed a badly-brushed hat.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "I really began to think that I was never going to see you again, Lady Middlewood."

"How do you do, Mr. Strahan?" returned Marietta loftily. "Yes, I suppose it *is* rather a long time since we last met."

But she could not help being glad to see him; she could not help showing that she was glad; nor could she help perceiving that he was not the dupe of her pretended indifference.

"It must be acknowledged," she said, impatiently

throwing off a futile mask, "that you haven't exhausted yourself in efforts to meet me."

"I have been so awfully busy," he pleaded; "you don't know how busy I have been! I did call upon you one day——"

"At an hour when I was quite certain to be out. Yes; so I saw."

"How can you say such fantastic things! Of course I wanted to find you at home; and I will find you at home yet, if you will allow me. When may I come? May I drive back with you now? I have an hour to spare."

He was in the carriage, which had already begun to move again, before she had time to give or withhold permission: no doubt one of the causes to which Strahan's success in life was due was the promptitude with which he was wont to suit the action to the word.

"Well, now," he began, as he settled himself by her side, "are we going to quarrel, or are we going to be friends? If you want to fight, I beg to say that I have a case—a pretty strong case."

Marietta turned her head and looked at him. From the beginning of their acquaintance there had always been moments when he had attracted, and others when he had repelled her; and just now, for some reason or other, he struck her as almost irresistibly attractive. His clearly cut features, his keen eyes, his intense, alert vitality—even the carelessness of his dress, which had sometimes affronted her fastidious taste—all seemed to her to mark him out as being, if not superior to other men, at least apart from them.

"Perhaps," she answered, with a slight smile, "you had better state your case."

"All right; my case is that, when I had the honour of staying with you at Ludworth, I was rather severely snubbed. Oh, not rudely, of course; but, whatever I may be, I hope I am not dense, and if I get a hint, I presume that I am meant to take it. You won't deny that you did give me a hint."

"A hint of what?"

"Well, a hint that I was no longer wanted in a capacity which you had been pleased to bestow upon me. Nothing could be more natural. As you yourself pointed out, you had your baby (I trust he is flourishing?) as well as your husband, and a confidential friend had become a superfluous luxury. I am not complaining; I merely wish to make it clear that I know my place and would rather not be obtrusive. When you returned to England, I waited, with the humility which is inherent in my nature, for a signal from you—and I didn't get one. Consequently, I paid a duty call, with the result that you know of, and tried not to feel hurt. I say all this to forestall your unreasonable assertion that I ought to have called a second time."

"I may as well tell you at once," answered Marietta, laughing, "that I don't believe you. I can easily believe in the excuse which you put forward just now, that you have been busy."

"Oh, it is true that I have been busy—and other things are also true. Anyhow, I am glad to see by your face that you are willing to forgive the offences which I haven't committed; so why should we dwell upon them? Tell me all about your Roman experiences instead; that will be a much more pleasant topic of conversation."

The expression of her countenance had not misled him; she was ready to pardon all his offences, real or imaginary, in consideration of what he had to offer her —a friendly and sympathetic attention. Some months earlier she had fancied herself able to dispense with him, and had even been dimly conscious that it might be wise and expedient to do so; but now she was no longer in that mood. It is easier, as well as far more agreeable, to do without wisdom and expediency than without sympathy, and she rather naïvely remarked, on concluding the lengthy and circumstantial narrative which he had invited, "One must tell one's little miseries and vexations to somebody—at all events, *I* must!

If you hadn't turned up in the nick of time, I believe I should have been driven to confide in my maid—which everybody says is a most disastrous thing to do."

They were already seated in the Arlington-street drawing-room, Lady Middlewood, who had been on her way to fulfil an afternoon engagement, having decided to neglect it and drive straight home. Strahan acknowledged the compliment paid to him with a bow and a smile.

"Without vanity," he remarked, "I think I may claim to be a little more trustworthy than a lady's maid. Perhaps just a trifle more intelligent, into the bargain."

His intelligence, at any rate, was equal to the appreciation of what that admission of hers implied; whether it was quite equal to the comprehension of a complicated and essentially feminine character might be another question. What impressed itself most upon him was her amazing lack of reticence and discretion. She had told him, almost as plainly as though she had uttered the actual words, that her husband counted for nothing in her eyes, whereas another man—the man whom she was addressing, in fact—counted for a good deal. What conclusion could she expect the other man to draw from such an avowal? But if Marietta was indiscreet, Roland Strahan had discretion enough for two. "I mustn't do it! It's too risky, and I really can't afford it," was the half-formulated thought in his mind, as he gazed at the beautiful woman whose eyes met his. Therefore, all that he said, after a short pause, was:

"So the Magliacci family declined to let bygones be bygones?"

"Yes; and I can't in the least understand why! Can you? It seems so perfectly ridiculous, considering what I am now—and what they are!"

Strahan's meditative smile seemed almost to suggest that he might supply an answer to the question if he chose; but apparently he did not choose. He only remarked:

"Well, I suppose it isn't a matter of supreme importance."

"You speak as if you understood no more than my father and Lionel do! That is exactly what they both said. My father found it incomprehensible that I should care about the notice of one old woman when all the other people in Rome delighted to honour me. But of course it was just the obduracy of that one old woman that made her supremely important—and spoilt everything. Can't you see that?"

"I dare say I can," answered Strahan, thinking to himself that possibly his own recent obduracy might be in some measure accountable for his present importance; "but if I were you, I should try very hard to look at life from a different point of view. At this rate you will never be without some good reason—some bad reason I should say—for being disgusted with the whole business."

"What is the use of talking like that? One looks at things as one's nature forces one to look at them, not as outsiders see them, nor even as they are. Please don't begin again with that weary old story about my numerous blessings! Let it be agreed, once for all, that I am abundantly blessed and atrociously ungrateful. At the bottom of your heart, I believe you feel exactly as I do. Why are you toiling and struggling all day long? Why are you giving yourself premature gray hairs?—for your hair *is* beginning to turn gray at the temples, though I don't suppose you have taken the trouble to notice it. Will you care so very much about being rich and a Colonial Prime Minister at the end of all? I am quite sure you won't."

"Very likely not; but the difference between you and me is that I am working towards a definite aim, and that I enjoy the process. So whatever the future may bring me, I am having a very tolerable sort of present."

"Oh, yes; your luck is better than mine in that respect, no doubt. But aren't you sometimes a little afraid

of the future? Don't you think, when you have accomplished your definite aim, you may discover that you want something else—something which it will be too late to think about then?"

Once more her audacity astonished him. If she did not mean the interpretation which most men would have placed upon her words to be given to them, she must surely realise that they were open to that interpretation.

As a matter of fact, she did realise this, and her recklessness was deliberate. She was provoked by the man's friendliness and self-control and insensibility; she wanted to stir his blood—wanted, at least, to find out whether his blood was not capable of being stirred. Her feminine intuition told her that she had a certain power over him, and she longed to make him acknowledge it. His reply, for which he kept her some time waiting, was not very conclusive.

"I make it a rule," he said gravely, "not to wish for impossibilities. According to you, one possible thing is as well worth wishing for as another, since one is bound to be satisfied with what one gets."

And at this point the entrance of two lady visitors gave him an opportunity to retire of which he was neither slow nor sorry to take advantage.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LADY MIDDLEWOOD'S DANCE.

The mansion in Arlington-street boasted, amongst other enviable accessories, of a really fine and spacious ball-room, in which only a very few balls had ever taken place. Under the reign of the late Lord Middlewood, who during the earlier part of his life had been hard

up and during the latter had been a widower, with no adult daughters to introduce, the question of utilising such an advantage had scarcely arisen, and for many years it had remained, with its crystal chandeliers and its red benches shrouded in brown holland, unvisited, save by housemaids and others, whose duty it was to keep the polished, inlaid floor in good condition. Now, the number of ball-rooms in London which are ball-rooms and nothing else may almost be counted upon a man's fingers, and that, no doubt, was why an affable Royal personage condescended, one evening, to say:

"You ought to give us a hop, Middlewood. Why don't you give us a hop? In these days, you are one of the rare people who can afford to do the thing well—and you don't do it."

Such a remark, coming from such a quarter, was equivalent to a command; and although, in truth, heavy death-duties had left Lionel with no superfluity of cash at his banker's he made haste to intimate to his wife that it was a case of sending out prompt invitations. A date so near at hand had been suggested to him that a formal ball, to which the whole of a large acquaintance would have had to be asked, might have been rather difficult to arrange; but this, it appeared, was not desired. The projected entertainment resolved itself into a dinner, to have the honour of meeting Royalty, followed by a small and early dance, which was not likely to terminate early, and of which the cost was certain to be anything but small. But questions of outlay possessed absolutely no interest for Marietta, who had never so much as inquired what her husband's income was, whereas the prospect of outshining sundry ladies who had scarcely noticed her of late applied the spur to her flagging energies. She threw herself into the plan with something like enthusiasm, and was warmly supported by Betty, whose declared opinion it was that this thing must be made a big success.

"Granny be bothered!" that resolute young woman said, after the list of invitations had, by request, been

submitted to the revision of her elders; "it isn't for the likes of her, at her time of life, to teach us to suck eggs. We know who you are bound to have; what depends upon judicious selection, and will make or mar the whole show, is the tail. Don't be offended, Marietta; but I've kept my eyes open for a good many weeks, while you have kept yours closed, and I believe, if you'll consent to be guided by me, I can provide you with a tail which will wag sublimely."

The result of provisional acquiescence on Marietta's part was a somewhat ruthless excision of high-sounding names and the substitution of others which, as Betty was good enough to explain, represented smartness and modernity. She went through the list alphabetically and took a great deal of trouble about it, bearing always in mind the inexorable necessity of keeping the numbers down and sacrificing not a few of her friends to her sense of the responsibility conferred upon her. When she reached the letter S., she paused, with uplifted pencil, and said:

"Well, he doesn't deserve it; but rather than seem to be vindictive, we will stretch a point. His name shall go down."

"Mr. St. Quintin's name was not on my list," remarked Marietta, who was looking over the writer's shoulder.

"So I see; but Lionel might be annoyed if he were left out, and as I say, one doesn't wish him to flatter himself that he has been purposely slighted. Well then, there is Mr. Strahan. Upon the present occasion, I think Mr. Strahan may be allowed to slide."

"No; he must have a card," returned Marietta decisively. "I particularly wish him to be invited."

Betty shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, very well; let him come, then. After all, he has a right to put in an appearance; for nobody can accuse him of not being sufficiently up-to-date. We shall have to be rather stern with the T's and the W's and the Y's, though: our limits are nearly reached."

Miss Betty's notions of the direction in which sternness required to be exercised did not coincide with those of her venerable grandmother, or Lady Rushcliffe's name, for instance, would hardly have figured amongst those bidden to a very select gathering. But, as Lady Rushcliffe was unquestionably "up-to-date," Betty perhaps knew what she was about, while Marietta, for her part, was much more eager about supper and decorations than desirous of excelling by means of a nice discrimination in her choice of guests. She attached, indeed, but slight importance to the distinctions and subdivisions of a society in which she had remained practically an alien, and, with the one exception just specified, had no change to make in her sister-in-law's amended catalogue.

The exception may have been a significant one; but she was scarcely conscious of its being so. Had she examined herself faithfully and honestly (a process for which she had no inclination), she would have discovered that, without being in love with Mr. Strahan, she was anxious and determined to make him a little bit in love with her. He had as good as challenged her to perform that feat, and he would get no more than his deserts by being taken at his word. She did not, however, mentally define the situation with such brutal exactitude; she merely made up her mind to convince a sceptic and misogynist that the course of this world's affairs is not ordered by considerations of practical utility alone, and that it may be a little unwise to boast of wearing a cuirass which has never yet rendered mortal man wholly invulnerable.

Consequently, when Strahan made his appearance at the small and early dance to which he had had the privilege of being bidden, his hostess, after shaking hands with him, did not suffer him to pass on in the wake of other arrivals. By a barely perceptible gesture she signified that she wished him to remain at her side, and there he accordingly stationed himself for half an hour, or thereabouts, not ill-pleased with the distinction

bestowed upon him and scrutinising, with quick, observant glances, all manner of fashionable and official folks as they filed past. The whole scene was extremely pretty, brilliant and suggestive of numerous reflections to the philosophic observer. Not the least suggestive feature in it, perhaps, was the person of the beautiful lady whose hair and neck were adorned with glittering gems, and who threw a remark to him every now and then over the bare shoulder to which he stood so near. Only the other day this resplendent creature had been one Marietta Vigne—an absolute nobody, if ever there was one—and only the other day her neighbour had been an obscure colonist, with little or no money in his pocket and prospects of the vaguest and most visionary character. Truly riches and honours are for those who take them by storm, and neither an intelligent man nor a beautiful woman need ever despair of anything!

It seemed almost as though Lady Middlewood desired to emphasise that sage comment upon mundane phenomena, when at length she turned to her guest and said smilingly: "I am not going to dance this evening. I don't know whether you are; but if not, there is an unoccupied sofa under that little forest of palms where we might sit in the shade and look on."

He would have been either more or less than human if he had not felt flattered, and of a colder temperament than he happened to be by constitution if the beating of his heart had not been accelerated. Could any woman—could even a woman so odd as Lady Middlewood give such an invitation under such circumstances without meaning rather more than she said?

"But won't you be obliged to dance?" he asked, as he moved beside her towards the spot which she had indicated. "Isn't it at least obligatory upon you to dance attendance on these Royal Highnesses? I never was in the room with a Royal Highness before, except once at a Levee, so I don't know much about their ways; but I thought the people who entertained them had to be always at their beck and call."

"Well," answered Marietta, "here I am—conspicuousyl ready to be beckoned and called for, when wanted. But I have done the necessary quadrille, followed by an unnecessary waltz, and I doubt whether I shall be summoned again before supper time. Other would-be waltzers have been warned off. I took it into my head, you see, to reserve myself for you."

The smile with which she made this announcement was not altogether easy to interpret. It had the effect of being provocative, triumphant, possibly a shade ironical. For once Strahan felt as if their respective parts had been reversed, and as if she were reading him, instead of his reading her. It sounded ludicrously matter-of-fact to ask "Why did you do that?" Yet, since he wanted to know, and was not unwilling to disconcert her, the query might have been worse worded.

She was not, however, in the least disconcerted. "Because," she replied, "you are such a difficult person to get hold of, and because you have a provoking habit of taking to your heels just when you are upon the point of interesting confessions. At the present moment, as you must see, flight is out of the question; so we will resume our last conversation, if you please, at the point where you broke it off. Do you remember how far we had got, or shall I help you?"

He remembered very well indeed—so well that his hold over himself, which had momentarily slackened, grew tense again with a conviction of imminent peril. If only that peril had been less obvious, less indisputable! But he saw it in an instant, as men of his temperament do see things, sharp and clear, with all its consequences, possible and probable, as plainly defined as if they belonged to the past, not to the future. This was going to be no question of a flirtation, or even a *liaison*, with a woman of the world, who knew what she was about; it was going—unless nipped in the bud—to be a very serious matter for one whose principle it was never to take women seriously. And that was why he answered, with a perfectly calm, level intonation:

"Oh, yes; you were saying, when those ladies came in and interrupted us, that I should some day regret having left romance out of account. But I don't think I shall; it isn't in old age that people are apt to cherish romantic regrets. Old age is essentially domestic, and no doubt by the time I have reached it, I shall be the husband of some worthy elderly woman, with a little money of her own, and a due sense of the duty of supplying me with creature comforts."

"Poor elderly woman, to have been sent into the world only for that purpose! But I expect your regrets to come rather before you arrive at the elderly stage."

"I shall endeavour to stifle them," said Strahan. "Some people—you, for one—enjoy regretting what they have missed; I don't. I mean to get all I can out of life; I refuse to tear the hair which you say is turning gray because I can't be what I am not, or secure what is out of my reach."

"In other words," she returned, with a scorn and anger which were genuine, and assumed in about equal proportions, "you have no heart; only a set of well-disciplined senses. So that even if you do miss the best that life has to give, you will never know it. I congratulate you; but, frankly, I don't——"

"You don't like me," said he, completing her unfinished sentence for her.

"*C'est entendu*—you have told me that before, to my sorrow."

"Your sorrow, like your future regrets, has been most successfully stifled. The liking for you which you know very well that I have had—should I be conspicuously concealing myself with you at this moment unless I liked you?—must follow suit, I am afraid. I remember your assuring me once that there were soft places in you, and I had a sort of hope that you might be speaking the truth; but now you have convinced me that you were not."

It was open to him to bow to that sentence, accept that virtual capitulation and terminate the interview;

but he was not, after all, made of sheer adamant, and Lady Middlewood was wonderfully lovely, and somehow or other, she forced his half reluctant eyes to encounter hers. So he remained for a time in what she had aptly described as conspicuous concealment with her, and said things which were scarcely reconcilable either with his previous professions or with the rules of conduct which he had laid down for himself.

It is needless to add that his hostess and he were a good deal noticed beneath their sheltering palms. The crowd was not large enough, nor was Lady Middlewood unimportant enough, for so prolonged a *tête-à-tête* to escape observation and comment. Even Betty, who had fish of her own to fry, and who was dancing with the energy which characterised all her proceedings, could not but remark that, every time she entered or left the ball-room, the same white and silver brocade gown and the same pair of black crossed legs maintained the same close juxtaposition.

"Now I'll just trouble you to look at that," said she, addressing a gentleman for whom she had chosen to keep a single dance, and who was so modest that he had been very much surprised when, in response to his diffident request, it had been granted to him. "For close upon one hour those two have been sitting there, without stirring, and, as far as I can see, there they are likely to sit until supper parts them. A nice row I should get into if I were to behave in such a way! 'Scandalous conduct' wouldn't be half strong enough language to meet the case, would it? But Marietta, it seems, may steal horses, while I mustn't look over hedges."

"It isn't for me to say what Lady Middlewood may or may not do," observed St. Quintin.

"I like that! Is it for you to say what *I* may or may not do, then? I wonder whether you know why I am now making a considerable sacrifice for a partner who dances uncommonly badly. You'll allow, perhaps, that you do dance badly?"

"Oh, yes; I'll allow that," answered St. Quintin, with

becoming meekness; "and I don't know at all why I am so honoured. I was just wondering."

"Well may you wonder! But I'll explain. The fact is that, on thinking things over, I came to the conclusion that I would give you an opportunity to beg my pardon for speaking as you did the other day. Most likely you didn't mean to be as offensive as you were."

"I certainly didn't mean to be offensive; but I am not going to beg you pardon," returned St. Quintin, stoutly. "You shouldn't have accused me of traducing you. Besides, I got as good as I gave. No man likes to be called a prig."

"Well," said Betty, after a moment of consideration, "I withdraw that epithet. You aren't really a prig; though I must say that you sometimes talk rather like one. Now, if you'll acknowledge that I'm not scandalous, we may shake hands."

"You are not scandalous," answered St. Quintin; "though I must say that you sometimes behave rather as if you were. Will that do?"

Betty laughed; "I suppose it must do: but don't put me into a rage again, please. I hate being put into a rage, and it has the worst possible effect upon me. Here comes Mr. Strahan, looking as if he might be enraged without much difficulty. What can Marietta have been doing to him!"

"I trust," said St. Quintin, "that she has been snubbing him. He requires it."

But the clouds which were visible upon Strahan's brow were not clouds of anger, nor had he been treated after the fashion alluded to. He was, however, immersed in thought and would not have noticed Miss Mallet, had she not arrested him by a familiar, peremptory gesture.

"Where are you off to, with that glum face?" she inquired. "Have you had a telegram to say that there is no more gold in the mines?"

He replied, without smiling, "I'm going home; I have a splitting headache. Good-night."

"Well," remarked Betty, after he had finished, "that's polite! And I who was going to ask him to take me in to supper!"

"Really," remonstrated St. Quintin, "you mustn't give such invitations to men; they might be misunderstood."

"Mustn't I? Dear me, what a pity! Because I was thinking of transferring the privilege to you."

"I'm different," St. Quintin declared.

"Why? Not because you are incapable of misunderstanding people, at all events. However, since you say you are different, we'll go in and feed together when the Royalties have finished. You will be as good so to note that this is a very generous concession on my part; for I believe I am entitled to a place at the Royal table. But there's no nasty pride about me!"

CHAPTER XXV.

GOOD LUCK AND GOOD GUIDANCE.

STRAHAN walked home from Arlington-street. It was a fine, warm night, and the rooms which he occupied were not very distant; so he thought that it would cool his head and promote sober reflection to proceed thither on foot. His head, as he had truthfully told Miss Mallet, was aching, and it was certainly hot—much hotter than any woman on earth ought to have been able to make it. This was what he said to himself, as he paced slowly down St. James's-street, with knitted brows and a cigarette between his lips. The most insistent impression of which he was conscious, out of several unforeseen impressions, was that he had been worsted in an encounter from which he had had every reason to expect that he would emerge victorious; and this angered him; for he

hated nothing so much as being beaten. It was, no doubt, an unusual light in which to regard such an experience as he had just passed through; but he was a somewhat unusual man. He had been singled out—very visibly and emphatically singled out—for favour by a lady whose rank and position were on a level with her physical charms, and his vanity was so little flattered that he actually ejaculated aloud, "Confound the woman! does she imagine that she is going to make a fool of *me?*"

She had not done so yet: of that, upon consideration, he was pretty certain. She had, to be sure, so far succeeded in making a fool of him that she had caused him to lose hold over himself and to utter words of which the purport must have been clear to her, though he could not now call them to mind with absolute precision. But between words and actions there is a vast space. No! he was still his own master; and his own master he meant to remain, were it at the cost of breaking Lady Middlewood's heart into little bits.

That decisive and slightly brutal summing up of the situation did him good and enabled him to indulge in a short laugh. It was no fatuity nor conceit that led him to assume the probability of Lady Middlewood's heart being engaged in the matter. He was so sane, so clear-sighted and, within limits, so experienced that the assumption scarcely excited him or gratified his self-love. Such a woman as she was, circumstanced as she was, must inevitably become enamoured, or fancy herself enamoured, of somebody, and he quite well understood by virtue of what qualities he had appealed to her imagination.

"And such a man as I am, circumstanced as I am," he added grimly, "is bound to turn a deaf ear to that class of enchantresses. Good Lord! is there so much difference between one woman and another that a man should risk ruin for the sake of a Marietta when it is open to him to console himself with a Polly or a Dolly? All the same, Marietta is a lovely name—and I have had a narrow squeak to-night!"

He had had so narrow a squeak that when he reached his rooms and flung himself down upon a chair beside the open window, with his arms folded upon the sill, he surrendered for a time to the visions which assailed his still heated brain. He was not going to do anything idiotic; so that there could be no great harm in letting the visions have their way with him, and the truth was that they were very pleasant. He fancied himself dwelling in some far-off, balmy clime with Marietta, and he acknowledged that the picture was a seductive one; though he laughed at it and at his own absurdity in contemplating it. All for love, and the world well lost!—what ludicrous rubbish! As if it were not a matter of universal knowledge, and almost of universal admission, that love is but a transient emotion, and that those who consent to lose anything for it are the blindest and silliest of dupes! It was exceedingly unlikely that Lady Middlewood herself, if it came to the point, would consent to sacrifice all that she would be called upon to sacrifice in order to convert such visions into realities. He was not under any illusion respecting her; he had studied her sufficiently to be aware that, in spite of the wide divergence between their respective characters, she was to all intents and purposes quite as selfish as he was.

"Yet I don't know," he muttered, as he blew a cloud of cigarette smoke into the still night air. "I can imagine her committing an act of splendid and stupendous folly—and I can imagine myself doing the same!"

Therein lay the sting of his meditations. He really could—and with no great effort either—imagine himself acting as no man since the world began has ever acted without speedy repentance. Twenty-four hours earlier his imagination would have been powerless to carry him so far, and the inference was as alarming as it was obvious. It was alarming, that is, in the sense that an express train, dashing suddenly along a line of railway which one has been preparing to cross, may be alarm-

ing. The peril is past; but the flesh of the heedless wayfarer is made to creep, and perhaps he gasps out a curse upon his heedlessness.

Strahan uttered no curses; but he pushed his chair back from the window, jumped up and exclaimed, with impatient irritation, "Oh, very well, then! I'm in love. What of that? I have been in love before now, and here I am, safe and sound in mind and body. It isn't a thing to make such a fuss about."

But possibly the reminiscences suggested to him by that statement of a fact were not altogether agreeable; for he frowned more heavily than ever and shook his head with greater decision. "I won't go and lunch with her, anyhow," was his final assertion, before resolutely dismissing the whole business.

Lady Middlewood had asked him to lunch with her on the following day, and he had accepted the invitation with alacrity; but of course nothing would be easier than to telegraph an excuse. This he accordingly did, as soon as he had had a few hours of sleep and had eaten his breakfast. By that time he was thoroughly awake, thoroughly alive to the necessity of caution, and likewise provided (by post) with matters for immediate attention which would, in any case, have prevented him from fulfilling his engagement. In the City, where he spent the whole day, he had to match his sharp wits against others not less acute; for the latest advices from Australia were rather unfavourable to the projects in which he was interested, and risks had to be incurred which sundry influential capitalists showed a disinclination to accept. Before nightfall, however, he had triumphed over the capitalists and had averted what for a moment had looked like an incipient crisis. He held in his deft fingers a large number of threads, which were liable to become entangled at any time, and which demanded the most delicate and dexterous manipulation; so that it was not upon Lady Middlewood that he had leisure to bestow a single thought during those anxious hours. But when, at the close of day, he had won his

Austerlitz (for indeed it was by no less a name that he mentally dubbed the victory that he had gained) and was leaning back, exhausted but exultant, in the hansom which was bearing him swiftly westwards, he was free to let his meditations recur to the minor excitements of life; and then it was that he exclaimed, with a retrospective smile, "By Jove! how uncommon near I was to putting my foot into it last night!"

The danger was over, and he could afford to smile at it. But not—oh, no, most certainly not!—to throw himself into temptation's way a second time. He had had his lesson; his vulnerability had been made evident to him; he had even, in his uncompromising way, acknowledged to himself that he was "in love" with Marietta—whatever that might mean. It only remained for him to profit by that lesson and that discovery, and to thank his lucky stars that in his case love was not synonymous with sheer madness. Upon that point he was complacently exempt from doubt—so much so that he indulged in a regretful sigh over what might have been. She was exquisite, she was glorious, she was perhaps the one woman in the world whom he had it in him to adore; but nothing that she could ever give him would replace what he must lose by the scandal of an elopement; and that she would be satisfied with nothing short of an elopement was his reading of her character. Consequently it would behove him to walk with the utmost circumspection; for, although he was determined to hold Lady Middlewood at arm's length, he did not wish to incur her resentment.

"It won't do to make her hate me," he mused. "She is very Italian; she wouldn't allow a slight to go unavenged—and a quarrel with Middlewood might be an awkward thing. Heavens! into what queer positions one drifts! I am half ready to die for her, and yet I do believe I would rather kill her with my own hands than allow her to spoil my life for me. But this isn't going to be a tragedy," he concluded, as the hansom drew up at his door; "it's only a rather bothering little mud-

dle, which I shall manage to put out of sight and out of mind presently."

A good many notes and letters were awaiting his perusal: amongst others, one with a thin black border and a viscount's coronet, which bore no stamp and was inscribed, "If at home, wait an answer." He tore the envelope open, foreseeing what its contents were likely to be; and steeling his heart against probable reproaches; but the tone of the missive was scarcely what he had anticipated.

"Why," his correspondent inquired, without preface, "do you telegraph what is so obviously a trumped-up excuse? Were you afraid of being bored?—or of what? And I have asked one or two people to meet you whom you would have been glad to know, and who will be dreadfully disappointed. Can you look in to-morrow between five and six o'clock? I ask because, as it happens, I shall be at home at that hour. Also because Lady Maria, who is coming to tea, wants to consult you, I believe, about some investments. Neither Lionel nor I can give her the information that she requires; so you might be good natured and advise her.

"Sincerely yours,

"M. L."

Apparently, then, that luncheon from which he had shrunk back affrighted had not been meant to partake of the nature of an assignation. Other people had been invited; Lady Middlewood had not contemplated a *tête-à-tête* with him; and reading between the lines, he perceived that she had not only divined his alarm but had been ironically amused by it. This discovery was at once reassuring and irritating: clever as Mr. Strahan was, he did not suspect that it might possibly have been designed to be both. He had never (by reason of the heartfelt disdain in which he really held the whole sex) taken the trouble to study women as closely as he had men, and to seek explanations of their frequent

inconsequences would have seemed to him rather a waste of time. He was not, however, above being angry with Marietta for laughing at him when he had anticipated tears; so he made haste to despatch a note to Arlington-street, in which he said what pleasure it would give him to call upon Lady Middlewood at the hour named, and how much he regretted that press of business had absolutely forbidden him to keep his engagement that day. She should at least be given to understand, he thought, that he was afraid neither of her nor of boredom nor of anybody or anything else in the wide world. He added that he would be charmed to give Lady Maria Halsted such financial advice as his poor knowledge and judgment could offer, and that—since she desired to consult him—he was surprised at her having neglected the many previous opportunities which she had had of so doing. Lady Maria, with her alleged pecuniary anxieties, was not, he presumed, to be taken seriously: Marietta's meaning had doubtless been, "Don't be alarmed; if you will consent to come to tea, an unexceptionable chaperon shall be present to protect you."

However that may have been, he did find the old lady waiting for him when he kept his tryst, and she astonished him not a little by the practical shrewdness of her queries. Not for nothing had she been the wife of the late Mr. Samuel Halsted, and if in some respects she was a goose, in others she was far wider awake than the majority of her neighbours.

"Fifteen or twenty per cent. sounds very nice," she remarked; "but, as one can hardly get three and a half on good security, the uncertainty of the security which you have to offer needs no demonstration. Of course, as you say, one may turn an honest penny by selling in a rising market; only the thing to find out is how long and how far the market can be expected to rise."

Mr. Strahan was sorry that, not being endowed with the gift of prophecy, he was unable to answer that question. Were it in his power to do so, his own fortune and that of a select number of his friends would

be as good as made. At the same time, he had nothing to conceal. Lady Maria now knew as much as he knew, and it was for her to decide whether speculation was or was not worth her while. Personally, he was of opinion that speculation was never worth the while of people who were already rich, and if he could afford to live upon the interest of a capital invested in consols, he would unhesitatingly grant himself that luxury.

While he was offering these sage counsels, and while Lady Maria was protesting that she was anything but rich, that the expense of a London season was ever so much greater than it used to be, that the demands of the incumbent of St. Winifred's knew no bounds, and so forth, he kept a furtive eye upon Marietta, who took no part in the conversation. There was the faint suggestion of a smile upon her lips all the time, and whether it was an amused or a mocking smile he could not determine. Once or twice he addressed himself to her; but she made no response. She only spoke to offer him a second cup of tea, and, as far as he could judge, she was not at all eager to be rid of the third person whose presence was becoming every moment more and more intolerable to him.

At length the old lady rose, remarking graciously that she had had a most interesting talk, out of which she hoped that the poor of London might ultimately derive some benefit, and presently Strahan had the satisfaction of holding the door open for her.

"This talk has not been very interesting to you, I am afraid," said he, as he returned towards the low chair in which Marietta was reclining.

"Not in itself," she answered; "but it has been interesting, after a fashion, to listen to you. I never feel quite sure whether you are speaking the truth or not."

"Thank you, Lady Middlewood; this is the second time that you have paid me that compliment. Would it be too presumptuous to inquire on what occasion you have heard me tell a lie?"

She laughed. "When I was being educated in an

Italian convent," she replied, "I used to be taught that the sin of lying consists in conveying false impressions, not in stating what is contrary to the fact. I am sure I can't tell whether you have conveyed any false impressions to Lady Maria; but I can see that she is going to buy your shares—and that, I imagine, was what you wanted her to do."

"I don't care a straw whether she becomes a shareholder or not," Strahan declared, with some warmth. "For choice, I would rather that she didn't—seeing that she may lose her money, and will certainly blame me if she does. You are not fair to me. If ever I have been candid with anybody, I have been so with you; although I have lowered your opinion of me by my candour, and although I have sometimes been more strongly tempted than you know of to depart from it."

"The night before last, for instance?" she asked suddenly, raising her eyes.

"Yes, I suppose so," he answered, letting his fall.

There was a brief silence, during which the hissing of the tea-kettle on its stand and the muffled roar of the traffic outside became almost oppressively audible.

"So you were not candid then," resumed Marietta at last. "Well, I must say that I did not think you were, and that absolves you from the guilt of conveying false impressions. The times when you have been really candid have been when you have assured me that you are absolutely and contentedly selfish. Is that it?"

"If," he began, drawing a step nearer, "I were as selfish as you make me out——"

But it was impossible to finish the sentence, impossible to tell her that most men would have made a very different use of the opportunities which she had been pleased to accord to him. So he left her to fill up the blank, which she did by saying, with perfect composure:

"You would lay siege to my susceptible heart, perhaps? Well, I do not forbid you to try. It even seemed to me that you did try a little the other night. But

really the danger is not so great as you imagine—though of course it is much to your credit that you should have decided, on second thoughts, to spare me."

He bit his lips. He had more than half a mind to take up her challenge, and more than half a suspicion that he might do so successfully. But he only remarked:

"This brings us back to our old difficulty. You may remember telling me at Ludworth that you doubted the possibility of friendship between a man and a woman. Evidently you are of the same opinion still."

"You have done something to confirm me in it," she rejoined. "But then, to be sure, you were not, as you say, sincere at the time."

In this way a very able man found himself between the horns of a rather awkward dilemma. Was he to assure Lady Middlewood that his sentiments for her were those of friendship alone, or should he (seeing that she was disposed to take so dispassionate a view of things) boldly avow that he had over-estimated his powers of resistance? It was with the deepest relief and the most heartfelt joy that he hailed the entrance, at that highly critical juncture, of Lady Middlewood's husband, and was thus enabled to dispense with both alternatives.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TIME FOR CONSIDERATION.

It was a matter of unanimous agreement among the disposers and dispensers of patronage that something would have to be done soon for young Lord Middlewood. He had succeeded to the title at a somewhat inopportune moment for his political prospects; but he had done good service to the party, he had worked well both

in the country and in the House of Commons, and some acknowledgment was clearly his due. The misfortune was that there were already too many members of the Ministry in the Upper House; so that, even in the event of a vacancy occurring, it would be scarcely advisable to fill it by the appointment of another peer. Under these circumstances, there appeared to be every probability that Lionel would be left for a considerable length of time to derive such comfort and consolation as he could from polite and appreciative speeches.

"But something is sure to turn up," said St. Quintin, who was ambitious for his friend and sanguine on his friend's behalf. "Things always turn up when they are least expected, and nobody's claims are likely to take precedence of yours."

Lionel, for his own part, did not anticipate office. He had discovered that he possesed certain abilities, and would have been glad of an occasion for turning them to account; but his modesty would not allow him to doubt that there were a great many men as well equipped as he in that respect, and he was well aware that, for the reason above specified, the Under Secretaryship which represented the limit of his aspirations was unlikely to fall to him.

All the greater, therefore, was his surprise when, one fine day, he received the offer of an important Indian Governorship, which was just about to be vacated. He had heard various prominent personages named as likely to succeed the actual occupant of that post, whose term of office had nearly expired; but it had not occurred to him that he himself might be in the running, and his first impulse was towards prompt and grateful acceptance. However, the Minister who sounded Lord Middlewood upon the subject did not seem to expect either promptitude or gratitude.

"Of course," he observed, "it means five years exile, and that is a serious drawback, I grant you; for you don't want to let your place and economise, as most of us do. All the same, if I may venture to offer a

word of advice, I wouldn't refuse without having thought it over. It is always a great thing, you see, to have held some such appointment as this—looking to the future, I mean. Take a week for consideration; we can easily allow you a week."

If Lionel availed himself of this gracious permission, it was not because he felt any difficulty about making up his mind. Large though his rent-roll was, he was a good deal hampered for the moment by the expenses attendant upon his succession, and an opportunity for effecting easy retrenchments was not to be neglected. But, setting that aside, the idea of being placed in a position of responsibility and authority was pleasant to him, and he quite hoped that it would be pleasant also to his wife. Marietta, he knew, had a little weakness for what he called "swagger;" she would certainly enjoy representing the Queen and being preceded by a mounted escort when she went out for a drive. So, with no misgivings on that score, he hastened home to tell his news, and arrived, as has been said, just in time to rescue a friend from an embarrassing predicament.

In Strahan's presence nothing, of course, could be divulged respecting a communication which had to be regarded for the time being as confidential, and Lionel, while giving him a hearty greeting, rather wished that he would take himself off. This, however, he appeared to be in no immediate hurry to do. The fact was that Strahan, a trifle confused and troubled, notwithstanding his relief, was anxious above all things to avoid appearing so, and to make it clear that he was only calling on Lady Middlewood in the discharge of a recognised social obligation. He, therefore, remained where he was and talked with rather more than his usual fluency, while Marietta, who did nothing at all to help him out, surveyed him critically from the other side of the tea-table.

Presently a servant came in with a message for Lionel. Somebody wished to know whether his lordship

was disengaged; so he got up, saying, "Very well; show him into the library. Don't go away, Strahan; I shall be back in a minute."

Strahan, who had also risen, made a movement as if to follow him, but was arrested, partly by the rapidity of Lionel's exit and partly by a not less rapid perception on his own part of the futility of running away. Were he to do so, he would unquestionably live to meet the same danger another day, and after all there is great virtue in an interruption. Consequently, he deemed it best to say, in a brisk, cheerful tone of voice:

"Well, Lady Middlewood, I am sure you must be thoroughly tired of me by this time, and we shall both be late for dinner if we don't go and dress now."

"Oh, I am not tired of you," answered Marietta calmly; "on the contrary, I don't know that I have ever found you more entertaining than you have been this afternoon. Still, if you are eager to get away, I won't keep you."

He was very eager indeed to get away, and very glad to make his escape; although he left the house with an irritated and unwonted sense of discomfiture. Had he not, he wondered, feared his fate too much? Hade he not, perhaps, made a mistake in assuming that this woman was more primitive, more rash, more likely to prove compromising than other women of the class to which she now belonged? Assuredly she had behaved very much as one of them might have behaved, and in all probability she was even now laughing at him.

She was not doing that; but a smile of gratified triumph hovered about her lips for some little time after her visitor had left her. Primitive or otherwise, she was at all events a woman, and it could not but be obvious to her that she had succeeded in doing what she had wished and intended to do from the first. Mr. Strahan at the outset of their acquaintance had as good as defied her, and she had retorted by subjugating him: that was quite sufficient to render her temporarily happy. Her desire—or so she told herself—had been

to hook her fish, rather than to land him; she was not at all sure that she cared about Strahan's friendship, and very nearly sure that she did not believe in it. He interested her; he differed from the average Englishman; she felt a certain satisfaction in having made his strong will bend to hers and a certain curiosity as to the nature of their future relations: that was all. Very likely she would have begun to despise him, as women are apt to despise their captives, had it not still remained excitingly doubtful whether he would not contrive to snap the slender thread by which he was held.

Lionel soon returned, to break in upon her complacent meditations.

"Has Strahan decamped?" he asked. "Well, I am not sorry; for I have a piece of intelligence for your private ear. I have had what I consider a great compliment paid to me this afternoon, and I want to hear how it strikes you."

It struck her, when she had been informed of the honour which was likely to be bestowed upon her husband, almost exactly as he had expected that it would. She roused herself from her reclining attitude, the light kindled in her eyes; upon the first blush of the thing it seemed to her that she would like nothing better than to play at royalty for a season. No doubt one of the causes of her discontent and disillusionment was that, although she was a personage in virtue of being Viscountess Middlewood, her destiny was to dwell amongst many other personages as great and greater. To be the undisputed head of a community would be a different and a far more alluring experience by her way of thinking. But second thoughts suggested drawbacks.

"Five years is a very long time," she remarked. "We should be able to come home for a few months every now and then, I suppose?"

"Well, no," answered Lionel; "I am afraid not. That is to say, *I* should not, for Indian Governors are not allowed leave; but you, of course, could."

Marietta contracted her brows and looked at him.

If she had ever been in love with her husband she was not in love with him now; yet he had the knack of occasionally provoking her into a sentiment not far removed from love.

"Thank you," she replied. "You wouldn't a bit mind my leaving you, then?"

"My dear girl, I didn't say I shouldn't mind it, and I hope you wouldn't want to do it. I only mean that it would be practicable if necessary."

"I see; and you are really ready to give up everything—your racing and your shooting and all the things you care about, not to speak of the people—for five long years!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "One must take the rough with the smooth. It is impossible to go away without leaving a good deal behind—that's of course."

"We may have to leave Bob behind," resumed Marietta presently. (Her son and heir had received the name of Robert, as the first of a long string of less plebeian ones.) "European children can't live in India, can they? I dare say you never thought of that."

But Lionel had thought of it; it had been, in fact, the very first thing that he had thought of, and he had been immediately reassured by the Secretary of State, who chanced to be related to the retiring Governor. "Oh, that would be all right," he said; "how could you imagine that I should dream of separating you from Bob? It seems that there is no risk in the case of such young children: besides, we should spend a good deal of our time in the hills, where there is a sort of English climate. If that is your only objection it may be dismissed."

That, however, was not her only objection, although the numerous others which she proceeded to put forward sounded somewhat trivial. She ended by saying: "Well, I suppose we are not obliged to make up our minds this very moment?"

"Oh, no," answered Lionel; "I am allowed a week to think it over. But as far as I am concerned, my

mind is pretty well made up; I think it would be a great mistake to let such a chance slip."

He looked so anxiously at her that even if she had been dying to accept the appointment she would have been unable to resist keeping him a little longer in suspense. "So that in fact all depends upon me?" she remarked. "Suppose I were to say that nothing would induce me to submit to banishment?"

He shrugged his shoulders again. "In that case, of course, I should have to decline with thanks. But I shall be rather sorry and rather surprised if you do say so."

Marietta, who was going out to dinner, mused over that statement with considerable satisfaction after she had placed herself in the hands of her maid. There were two men in the world whose destinies she desired to control, and it looked very much as if her ambition had been, or was about to be, gratified. Not that she put the case to herself in those words, or was even fully conscious that such was the case. What she was conscious of was a new and agreeable sense of power, together with a good deal of curiosity to hear what Mr. Strahan would say when informed of her probable departure from England. She quite intended to inform Strahan; nor was her intention at all modified by what Lionel said presently as they drove off together towards the house at which they were to dine.

"By the way, Marietta, don't let anybody know of this appointment having been offered to me. The offer hasn't been made officially, you see, and it would be a breach of confidence to mention it."

She was, at all events, not tempted to mention it to anybody whom she met that evening, and during the next few days Strahan made no sign. Several times in the course of those days Lionel asked her whether she had come to a decision yet; but she always replied tranquilly, "I am thinking it over. You said I might think it over for a week."

She was not, in truth, any nearer to a decision than

she had been at the outset. The first thing that was likely to help her towards one would be the interview with Mr. Strahan, to which she looked forward confidently and without impatience. It might prove necessary to summon him by a note; but she did not think it would be. Inexperienced though she was, she had that intuitive knowledge respecting certain subjects which is the property of her sex, and she was perfectly well aware that her so-called friend would be irresistibly drawn back to Arlington-street ere long, despite the many excellent reasons that he might have for shunning that quarter.

He did not disappoint her. On the following Sunday afternoon (she had foreseen that he would be at leisure on Sunday afternoon, and had remained at home on that account) he was announced, and the half-defiant, half-shamefaced air which he was not very successful in disguising told her at once all that she wanted to know.

"This is splendidly courageous of you," said she. "I thought I should never have the honour of receiving you alone again after the fright I gave you the last time you were here."

He did not smile, nor did he invite her to explain herself. On the contrary, he frowned heavily, and appeared to think that no explanation of her method of greeting him was required.

"I don't think I am very easily frightened," he answered, after a pause. "I have come back because—well, because I find that I can't get on without seeing you sometimes, I suppose."

"Oh, no," she returned coolly, "you have come back because you can't bear the idea of looking ridiculous and because you have an uncomfortable impression that I thought you ridiculous the other day."

This, without being precisely the truth, was so near it that he almost started. The woman with whom he had fallen in love against his will could read him with as

little difficulty as he had hitherto experienced in reading her, then!

"Oh, is that it?" said he. "But perhaps we may leave motives alone. Here I am, anyhow."

"Yes, here you are," she rejoined, with much cheerfulness; "and that, as you evidently think, is the chief thing. I hope you will be glad to hear that I didn't think you so very ridiculous, and I hope you will be sorry to hear that very soon it won't matter a bit what I think about you, seeing that I shall be thousands of miles away."

She proceeded abruptly to state her news, allowing him to infer that the matter was settled, and watching him narrowly while she did so. But this time his compressed lips and lowered eyes revealed nothing. He neither changed colour nor moved a muscle: he seemed so little astonished that she ended by asking:

"Have you heard of this already? Lionel represented it to me as a profound secret; but I am always the last person to be let into his secrets!"

"No," answered Strahan, looking up; "oh, no; I hadn't the least idea that anything of the sort was in contemplation." He added meditatively, "If Middlewood goes to India——"

He did not conclude his sentence, and Marietta said "well?" in interrogative accents.

"I was only wondering whether that would entail his retirement from our board. I hope not; but he is so punctilious that I am almost afraid it will."

The man was obviously sincere. There could not be the least doubt that his first thought, on hearing an announcement which had been intended to throw him into consternation, was for the Company which he served, not for the lady who had flattered herself that he was her servant, and this unexpected turning of the tables upon her left Marietta speechless with chagrin. But after a moment he shook off his preoccupation.

"And you?" he asked suddenly. "Do you relish the prospect of being packed off in such a hurry and

expelled for such a very long time from your native land?"

She replied by a gesture of disdainful indifference, "England can scarcely be called my native land," she remarked, "and really with the exception of Betty, there is nobody in England whom I particularly wish to see again."

He made her a little smiling bow. "You know how to cauterise the wounds that you inflict," said he.

But cautery can only be resorted as a remedy in the case of very superficial wounds, and certainly it had not been her intention to heal any that he might have received at her hands. If at that moment she could have stabbed him, metaphorically, to the heart, stabbed he would have been; but it was evident that his heart was well protected.

"I will make a point," she told him, "of begging Lionel not to resign his directorship. Then you will be quite happy."

"Happy!—with the prospect of losing sight of you for five years, if not for ever? I think you know a little better than that, Lady Middlewood."

"I know better," she replied, with an outward composure which did her credit, "than to believe one single word that you say. For the rest, it is not certain that we shall go to India. All depends upon me, and I depend upon the mood that I may happen to be in."

"Don't go!" he exclaimed suddenly, bending forward and clasping his hands.

She rose, without making any response to this entreaty. "Will you think me very rude," she asked, "if I beg you to excuse me and say good-bye for the present? I have promised to meet Lionel at Tattersall's before five o'clock, and I shall only just have time to drive there."

She did not wait for the permission which he could not refuse, but retired with some show of hurry, leaving him to find his own way out of the house.

CHAPTER XXVII.

INDIA GOES TO THE WALL.

If Marietta had made a half promise to join her husband at Tattersall's, he was not aware of it, nor would it ever have occurred to him to expect her appearance at a resort which he himself seldom neglected to patronise on Sunday afternoons. But the paramount importance of dismissing an antagonist with whom she felt, on a sudden, powerless to cope had necessitated some excuse; so she had said the first thing that chanced to come into her head.

She hastened up stairs to her luxurious bedroom, locked the door and cast herself down upon a sofa. There were tears in her eyes; but whether they were tears of sorrow or anger or mortification she hardly knew. For the matter of that, she hardly knew why she should be so upset, or why she should have been driven to seek safety in ignominious flight. Troops who become demoralised and take to their heels under fire seldom know, it is said, what they are about, and panic is quite as likely to be caused by an imaginary danger as by a real one. But what admits of no doubt from the moment that they turn and run is that they are beaten, and this was the humiliating conviction brought home by her own act, to Marietta. Her relations with Strahan had always partaken of the character of a contest; her supposed capture of him had rendered her exultant just because it had been achieved in the teeth of his undisguised struggles for freedom; and now, lo and behold! it appeared she had exulted too soon. Like a disconsolate fisherman whose straightened rod and broken, ineffectual line, have an eloquence beyond words, she could but groan and mutter forlornly, "Oh, what a fool—what a fool I have been!"

But was it, after all, such a tragic affair? Suppose Mr. Strahan did care more about gold mines and busi-

ness transactions than about anything else in the world; suppose it was a matter of comparative indifference to him whether Lord and Lady Middlewood betook themselves to Asia or not, so long as the former continued to be one of the directors of the famous company; suppose, in a word, he had his emotions so well under control that they might always be relied upon to come to heel when called—what then? It is annoying no doubt to be beaten, and especially annoying, to be beaten in the moment of fancied victory; but defeat—or, at all events, defeat of that kind—is scarcely a thing to cry about. Why not decide at once that the grapes are sour?

To such a question there is one, and perhaps only one, convincing answer. It was Marietta's misfortune to make that answer, and she made it, for the sake of additional emphasis, aloud.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "I do love him! Or else I hate him. I don't quite know which it is; but this I know —I would rather die than leave him!"

Then she became a little ashamed of herself—a little, but not very much. If she was to blame so was Lionel, who ought to have understood how impossible it was for a nature like hers to rest satisfied with the lukewarm, domestic affection which in his case had so soon replaced love. How could he expect her to be in love with him, now that he was so evidently no longer in love with her? It was wrong, of course, to be in love with somebody else—if, indeed, she was really in love with Mr. Strahan—but so many things which are called wrong cannot possibly be helped! What might easily enough be helped was lingering in the neighbourhood of a recognised peril; but she had neither the strength of purpose nor the self-abnegation to leave England. She had been instructed to make up her mind, and it was now made up. The Indian Government must manage its affairs to the best of its ability without the assistance of Lord Middlewood. And when she heard him moving about in his adjoining dressing-room (for the self-communings summarised above had

occupied her a long time) she resolved to make her decision known without further delay.

"Lionel," she said, abruptly invading his territory, "we are not going to India."

He turned an astonished countenance towards her. It was a warm, close evening, and he had divested himself of his coat and waistcoat; but the dressing hour had not yet arrived; so that his valet was not present to be scandalised by this unusual and unexpected appearance of her ladyship.

"Not going to India!" he repeated. "What makes you say that? You don't mean that they have offered the appointment to some other fellow!"

Marietta laughed rather nervously. She had no idea of faltering in her purpose; but it did make her feel a little nervous to remember that in her haste she had omitted to provide herself with plausible reasons.

"I can't tell you anything about that," she answered. "The Secretary of State has not been here, and I don't suppose he would have taken me into his confidence if he had. But somebody else will have to be appointed; because we are going to decline. I have been thinking it over, as you said you wished me to do, and I see that the drawbacks would be out of all proportion to the advantages. On Bob's account alone, we ought to refuse I think; for I can't believe that it is really safe to take babies into such a climate. And then there is the horrid voyage—and the being cut off from everybody whom one knows—and the nuisance of having to entertain a horde of dull officials and their wives every day—and—and—oh, fifty things! It would really be sheer lunacy for us to expatriate ourselves; I am sure you must agree with me that it would! It stands to reason that if you must needs have employment, you are powerful enough to ask for something at home."

Lionel shook his head. He had not, he assured her, the power which she was pleased to give him credit for possessing, and if he should spurn the important and much-coveted post which had been offered to him, Min-

isters would certainly give him to understand that he must expect no further acknowledgment of his slight claims upon their patronage. Then he made her state all her objections categorically, and combated them, one by one, until—feeling that she was getting the worst of the discussion—she cut it short by exclaiming, with sudden impatience:

"Oh, what is the use of arguing! You won't convince me, and I shan't convince you, and I dare say the Government is not open to conviction. Suppose you say simply that you are cursed with a capricious wife, who won't let you go? That will absolve you, and it will have the additional advantage of being true."

Lionel doubted whether it would be held to absolve him; but he did think that there was a good deal of truth in the assertion. Yet, in spite of his disappointment, which was keener than she realised, he did not lose his temper.

"It isn't a question of actual duty," he remarked. "If it were I might take the liberty of saying that I can't give way to mere caprice. But I won't say that; I will only ask you whether you can't stretch a point to please me. I believe you would like the life when you got out there, and I confess I do very much want to go. Can you do me this favour?"

Marietta frowned. "No," she answered sullenly. "I can't. You may order me to go, if you choose, and then I should have to obey, I suppose; but I will never go of my own free will. I should hate it!"

"All right," answered Lionel, quite quietly and pleasantly; "then we'll say no more about the matter. Heaven forbid that I should order you to do anything that you would hate! And we won't quarrel over it either," he added, perceiving that she still looked angry and resentful.

Her looks were the outward and visible signs of her sensations. Considering what her true reason for wishing to remain in England was, she could not but resent this air of generous magnanimity on her husband's part.

Without even knowing how much in the wrong she was, he had yet contrived to make her seem almost absurdly in the wrong; and this was the more aggravating of him because he could not really be burning with anxiety to waste five years of his life in Hindostan. So she had neither thanks nor apologies at his service.

"I am sure I don't want to quarrel," she returned coldly; "I don't see what there is to quarrel about. You told me that I was to make up my mind whether I wanted to go to India or not, and I have done as I was told. I am sorry that I couldn't give the answer which you seem to have expected; but——"

"Oh, that's all right! that's all right!" interrupted Lionel cheerfully. "We'll think no more about the thing; we'll treat it as a closed chapter."

He was as good as his word. He went to the India Office the next morning to say that, after full consideration, he felt compelled by domestic reasons to relinquish the idea of leaving home, and from that moment he appeared to dismiss the subject from his mind. He had not, indeed, mentioned it to anybody, except his wife, and if he harboured any lurking feeling of soreness against her, he was either too proud or too generous to display it.

As for Marietta, she really could not afford to allow him credit for generosity. When one is aware of having committed a somewhat shabby action, one must either abstain from respecting those who are likely to suffer thereby or else let one's self-respect go by the board, and the former course is generally found preferable to the latter. So Lady Middlewood made things comfortable with her conscience by concluding that her husband was too weak a man to insist upon having his own way, and too easy-going to mind very much being deprived of it. She was far less pre-occupied with thoughts of him than of a man who was neither weak nor easy-going, and to whom the abandonment of the Indian scheme might only too probably represent itself in the light of a personal compliment. What was she to say to Mr. Stra-

han (whom she had already begun to call "Roland" mentally) at their next meeting? She knew him well enough by this time to know how little chance there was of his being taken in by fibs.

She had not long to wait for their next meeting, which took place at an afternoon concert, given by a benevolent Duchess in aid of some insolvent charitable organisation or other. Marietta, who had of late obstinately refused to lift up her voice in public, had been persuaded to make an exception on this occasion, and she was rewarded for a couple of songs by louder and more sustained applause than is usually to be got out of so well-dressed an audience. The long room in which the concert was held was darkened by lowered sunblinds, so that she did not recognise many acquaintances amongst those to whom she bowed her acknowledgments; but it was impossible to help seeing Strahan, who was seated in the second row, and who lingered, after the conclusion of the performance, with the obvious intention of accosting one of the performers.

"I have a confession to make," he began, as soon as that intention had been successfully accomplished; "I want to tell you that—to my sorrow—I have no ear for music, and am utterly incapable of appreciating what I have just heard."

"I suspected as much long ago," returned Marietta disdainfully; "I was almost sure that the compliments which you were pleased to pay me upon my singing were not sincere, and I can't understand why you thought it worth while to pay them. Still less can I understand your paying half-a-guinea to sit in a stuffy room on a hot afternoon and clap your hands when somebody makes a noise that you don't like."

"Everything is explained by the simple fact that you were that somebody. I didn't clap my hands for anybody else, and it was delightful to have an excuse for doing what I feel tempted to do every time that I see you. Besides, I felt it a matter of sheer necessity to make some public demonstration of joy over the news

which I saw in this morning's papers that Sir Somebody Something—I don't know who he is, and I'm sure it doesn't matter—has been appointed to that Indian governorship. Is it allowed to me to express my gratitude, as well as my joy?"

"I don't know," answered Marietta: "but I should think it was. At any rate, I am sure Lionel will be glad to have avoided putting you to inconvenience by giving up his directorship."

"My dear Lady Middlewood, I have the highest esteem and regard for your husband; but I really can't flatter myself that he has refused an appointment rather than risk putting me to inconvenience. You told me, you know, that it rested solely with you to say whether the appointment should be accepted or rejected; so it can only be to you that my humble and heartfelt thanks are due."

She could not have sworn that there was any suggestion of mockery either in his voice or in his smile; yet her colour rose and a gleam of wrath came for a moment into her eyes. Even if he guessed—and she was afraid he did guess—the truth, he had no right to be so ungenerous! She managed, however, to produce a stare and a rather disagreeable laugh for his benefit.

"Why in the world should you thank me?" she asked. "Do you by any chance flatter yourself that I am staying in England for your convenience? *Ce seriat un peu fort!*"

He was not in the least disconcerted; although he affected to be. And what was worse was that he was not in the least misled. That much she was able to detect, notwithstanding his respectful assurances that he spoke merely as one of a large number of people who must needs feel grateful to her for sparing them a bereavement. "The sun doesn't rise in order to make me comfortable," he remarked; "but that doesn't prevent me from rejoicing in sunshine and shivering under a gray sky."

She turned upon him with something of the im-

potent anger of an animal caught in a trap. "Why do you address such silly *banalités* to me? Why did you pretend to be fond of music, when you know nothing about it? Why do you *never* tell the truth?"

It was characteristic of this queer and prolonged duel between two persons, neither of whom was altogether in earnest, that, in the course of it, parries and thrusts were for ever changing places, and that what had been intended for the former not unfrequently proved ordinarily to be the latter. Strahan, who, according to the rules of the game, should have been pushing his advantage, now perceptibly fell back. The truth? Good heavens! what would she demand next? And in that public place too! He began hastily to defend himself against her charge of insincerity.

"Of course I ought to have acknowledged before now that I can't distinguish one tune from another; but nobody likes to parade his infirmities. One doesn't go about the world proclaiming that one has a deaf ear or a glass eye or a set of false teeth. Moreover, I proved my repentance by confessing of my own accord. I did so just because I wanted to convince you that you are not fair when you bring these accusations against me. I consider that, as a rule, I am a very truthful man."

A man whose truthfulness has never been called in question by those who know him, but whose judgment was perhaps liable to be warped by prejudice, was at that moment pronouncing an altogether different opinion of Mr. Strahan.

"Well, since you ask me," St. Quintin was saying, "I don't much like the fellow, and I don't much believe in him. He isn't straight—at least, not according to my ideas. All the same, old Hicks and other big City men profess to have confidence in him. He *may* be all right; but I shouldn't trust him with money myself, if I had any to invest."

The military-looking old gentleman to whom this rather imprudent statement was made had no money to invest, nor any curiosity respecting Mr. Strahan's finan-

cial soundness. On the other hand, he would have felt vaguely distrustful of any man who should have called up into Lady Middlewood's countenance the expression which he was watching from afar, and his fingers twitched nervously, as they stroked his waxed moustache.

"I met him down at Ludworth last year," he remarked. "He is a fine horseman, and he struck me as a clever, pleasant fellow. But you know, my dear Mr. St. Quintin, so many of these devilish pleasant fellows are—are——"

He did not proceed to say what they were, but broke off, with a somewhat forced laugh. "Well, it's none of my business," he said. "Now I must go and speak to my daughter, who will give me a nice scolding, I expect, for arriving in London unannounced."

The room had emptied itself slowly—as the rooms of ducal personages, which are temporarily placed at the service of the paying public, are rather apt to do—but by this time the audience had almost dispersed, and Colonel Vigne had only to make his way through some rows of intervening chairs in order to approach his daughter, whose back was turned towards him. He drew near in time to catch the fag-end of a speech which was intended for her neighbour's ear alone.

"I can be at home and alone almost any afternoon, if I am given previous notice," the Colonel heard her say.

Then Strahan recognised him, and immediately afterward Marietta, whisking round, did the same. Exclamations, greetings, and upbraidings followed, under cover of which Strahan slipped quietly away.

"Oh, I have no excuse to make for myself," said the old gentleman, to whom his daughter's reproaches were not wholly unwelcome. "It is atrocious of me to drop upon you from the skies like this; but what would you have? I don't wish to be a burden upon my son-in-law; yet I have only one child and only one grandchild. Consequently——"

"Consequently," rejoined Marietta, "when you do come to England, you might, I think, consent to live under the same roof with them. You certainly would, if you knew how much one of them wants you."

She meant what she said. Very often she wanted her father, and just now he seemed to her to have been sent by Heaven for the express purpose of protecting her from an impending peril.

"What has brought you here, of all places?" she asked.

"An advertisement which I saw in the paper, as I was travelling up from Dover yesterday," he replied. "No, my dear, I can't quarter myself upon your husband; but I'll drive home with you now, if I may. I want to have a look at the boy."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEVOUT LOVER.

THE shadow of black care was not very far distant from Colonel Vigne's elbow while he reclined in his daughter's luxurious equipage and chatted, with every outward show of cheerfulness and elderly high spirits. The truth was that his daughter reminded him terribly of her mother, and there had been episodes in her mother's existence which he would have been well pleased to be able to forget. The late Mrs. Vigne, unhappily, had not been an altogether model wife, and although, in one sense, her husband was remorsefully conscious of having misunderstood her, in another sense he had understood her only too well. Was he now, in his old age, to suffer again those torments of anxiety, those humiliating fits of impotent rage against men with whom it was difficult to pick a quarrel, which had

embittered the days of his youth? Flirtation is an elastic term, which may be made to cover a multitude of sins, as well as a multitude of proceedings which it would be an exaggeration to call sinful. He had never known for certain what the nature of his wife's proceedings had been; but he knew that she had made him thoroughly unhappy, and it made his heart sink to see Marietta treating Strahan after much the same fashion as certain Austrian officers, now gray-headed or dead, had been treated by one to whom she bore so striking a physical resemblance. He knew better, however, than to remonstrate with her or catechise her. He asked a few careless questions, indeed, and received answers which he surmised to be disingenuous; but there he stopped. Experience warned him against speaking as plainly to his daughter as he had done to St. Quintin.

St. Quintin, meanwhile, was walking slowly towards his club, with his hands behind his back and a bent head, full of thoughts wherein Lady Middlewood and Strahan had no share. The troubles, the follies, the destinies of our neighbours become interesting when we ourselves have reached middle-life, and have a little breathing space in which to watch the progress of the unvarying, yet mildly exciting human tragi-comedy which is being enacted around us; but in youth we are naturally apt to be pre-occupied with our own affairs, and the affairs of this young man had taken an ill turn.

They had taken, that is to say, a turn which, as a reasonable, sensible being, he could not but call deplorable; although he would not, if the choice could have been offered him, have had them altered. This, of course, means—are there any other circumstances under which such a condition of feeling would be possible?—that a man who was nothing, if not sensible, had fallen in love with a lady hopelessly out of his reach. For some days past St. Quintin had been aware that he stood in that rather absurd position, and calling himself by various unflattering names had not altered it in the least. It was a thing which must be submitted to,

like any other incurable malady, and which, like some incurable maladies, admitted of concealment from the unsympathetic gaze of bystanders. The only question was whether it did or did not behove him to steer clear of further contact with its cause. He did not consider that he was placing his reputation for common sense in jeopardy by answering that question in the negative.

"Having caught a disease," said he to himself, "one can't catch it over again, that's certain, and I don't see what possible harm it can do me to go to St. Winifred's next Sunday. Perhaps it will do me as little good as it has to attend this tedious concert, at which she never appeared, after all; but I'm willing to take my chance. On the one side there's the possible disappointment of not seeing her, and the probable misery of seeing her in the company of people whom I hate; on the other side—well, there isn't much on the other side, I must admit; but there's all I have to hope for henceforth. Good Lord! what an unspeakable ass I am!"

It will be observed that, in striking this balance, he did not take any conceivable danger to the lady's peace of mind into account. An ass he might be; but he really was not quite such an ass as to imagine that the Honourable Betty Mallet, that renowned beauty and heiress, could become enamoured of his homely countenance and modest social position. The young lady herself had, indeed, been so explicit with him of late that he could hardly, even if he had been so inclined, have cherished such an illusion. Their friendship though liable, as we have seen, to occasional interruptions, stood upon a sufficiently firm basis to render mutual comprehension easy, and he knew from Betty's own lips that, were she disposed to fall in love with anybody, it would be with Lord Charles Jocelyn.

"Not that I mean to marry him," she had added reassuringly; "that would be rather too great a risk. Still it *would* be jolly to pay the poor fellow's debts and set him on his legs again. What's the use of me, except to pay somebody's debts?"

St. Quintin had inwardly rejoined, "And what's the use of me, except to preserve you and your fortune from being devoted to that purpose?"

He really thought that he might thus be of some slight use to her. The paternal affection with which he had formerly regarded her was not extinct, although, for his misfortune, he had been compelled to acknowledge that he now saw her with less dispassionate eyes, and he was keenly alive to her unprotected state. Lady Maria was old, besides being determined, as old people so frequently are, to see nothing except what she wanted to see, while Lionel, if he chose to interfere at all, would be apt to do so with a hand somewhat too heavy to be serviceable.

The upshot of all this was that St. Quintin attended the church of St. Winifred's on the following Sunday morning, and was an edified participant in a *Missa cantata*, celebrated in strict accordance with the use of Sarum. Being in a state of lamentable ignorance with regard to questions of ritual, and too uneducated, from a musical point of view, to appreciate the beauties of plain song, he arrived at conclusions respecting the serivce and those who took part in it which were neither very just nor very charitable. He was, however, just enough to admit that he was in no position to throw stones, seeing that he had not come to church for the purpose of saying his prayers, and indeed made no attempt to do anything of the kind while on his knees. His gaze and all his attention were riveted upon two female heads a short distance in front of him, one of which, surmounted by a flowery bonnet, nodded and quivered continually, while the other—a little blonde head, poised firmly above a well-shaped pair of shoulders—was turned every now and again to right and left after a fashion which suggested that its owner was not wholly absorbed in devotional exercises. The congregation was a large and evidently aristocratic one; it included a great many people whom St. Quintin knew by name, together with a few whom he knew personally, and it

did not include Lord Charles Jocelyn. Of that he satisfied himself very soon after his entrance; perhaps, next to the fact that Betty Mallet was amongst the worshippers, that was the chief thing that he had been anxious to ascertain.

But, of course, he was not there with the sole object of contemplating the back of Betty's head, wishing vainly that it were still adorned with the childish pigtail which had been discarded for ever, and sighing under his breath at regular intervals. Having appointed himself the young lady's unofficial watch-dog, it was clearly incumbent upon him to watch over her to the best of his ability, and he was not without hope that she would grant him a brief opportunity of discharging this humble function on the conclusion of the service. So he was waiting in the porch when Lady Maria and her granddaughter emerged, ready to extend a hand which both of them seemed pleased to grasp.

"This is really nice of you!" said Betty. "I am sure you are a malignant Protestant at heart and hate the smell of incense, so we may accept your presence as a personal compliment. You are coming back to lunch, of course. I am going to the Park for half-an-hour as soon as I have tucked granny into her brougham, and you may accompany me if you like."

Lady Maria, whom he was assisting into her carriage, at once seconded the invitation to luncheon.

"Always so glad to see you!" she was kind enough to say. "And do, like a good man, walk off to the Park with that child and keep an eye upon her. At my age one can't be everywhere, and she invariably picks up such a crew of disreputable women coming out of church that——oh, how do you do? I didn't see you. I was just telling Mr. St. Quintin that I don't half like Betty to exhibit herself in the Park with some of you; nobody, meeting her in such company, would be likely to believe that she had been to church at all."

The lady thus politely accosted—who was a tall, handsome, finely developed personage, with bold eyes,

auburn hair, and a complexion so utterly impossible that no charge of falsity could be brought against it—laughed aloud.

"Thanks so much!" she returned. "I heard you calling me disreputable, so I thought I would step forward and try to make you feel ashamed of yourself. But it doesn't seemed to have been much of a success."

The old lady grunted. "I wish you had as little reason to be ashamed of yourself as I have," said she. "No, I am not going to beg your pardon; I can't help it if listeners sometimes hear the truth about themselves. But you are a good-natured sort of sinner, I must admit."

Lady Rushcliffe laughed again. She was certainly good-natured, and we are all sinners. Possibly her sins were not so very much more numerous or heinous than those of her fellow-creatures; but, such as they were, it pleased her to draw the thinnest of veils over them, and the consequence was that no wise mother would have cared to let her daughter appear in public under Lady Rushcliffe's wing.

This was what St. Quintin was thinking to himself, with a puckered brow, after Lady Maria had been whirled away and he had joined a small procession of smartly-attired ladies and gentlemen. He could not, in fact, resist hinting as much to his companion, although he knew that hints of that kind were rather dangerous.

"Lady Maria is quite right, you know," he remarked.

"In what she says or in what she does, do you mean?" asked Betty.

"Oh," answered her mentor, smiling, "I am afraid very few of us are as good as our word. Lady Maria is extremely kind and indulgent, but——"

"Now look here," interrupted Betty, "if you have it in your mind to abuse my friends, let me implore you to change your mind while there is still time; because I won't stand that sort of thing, even from you."

"Do you call Lady Rushcliffe a friend of yours?" St. Quintin inquired.

"Yes, I do," replied Betty, decisively and a little defiantly. "What then?"

"I am sorry to hear it, that's all. Sorrow isn't equivalent to abuse, I hope?"

"It is, when it is expressed in that way. And why should you be either sorrowful or abusive? I don't force you to associate with my friends, do I?"

"No; but you force me to see you associating with them, which is a good deal worse. Say what you will, they are not fit associates for you, some of them, and you show that you know it by being so touchy."

"I am afraid," said Betty, "you were not listening to the sermon this morning. It was a nice, bright little discourse, as all the St. Winifred's discourses are, and I quite agreed with the preacher. There is nothing so easy, he told us, as to discover other people's failings, and there are few things more difficult than to recognise our own."

"Really," observed St. Quintin, "if that was all he could do for you in the way of a novel announcement, I think he might have spared himself the trouble of climbing up into the pulpit. No, I wasn't listening to him, I confess. I was thinking about other things—chiefly about you and the people whom you choose to call your friends. I don't believe you have any real liking for them, and I am sure that you do yourself more harm than you are aware of by accepting hospitality and other favours from them. It may be owing to some mistaken feeling of generosity on your part, or it may——"

"Or it may," interrupted Betty, "be due to my obstinate determination to let nobody dictate to me. I don't like your sermon nearly as well as the other, and I would rather not hear the end of it, please. You can't have anything to say that you haven't said a dozen times already, without the smallest effect. Lady Rushcliffe is what she is, and Charlie Jocelyn is what he is, and—

and sometimes you make me wish that you weren't what you are! It is so stupid of you to make an old friend and ally wish that!"

"I suppose it is," sighed St. Quintin; "I suppose I might as well hold my tongue for any good that I am likely to do. And yet I can't help seeing that you stand very much in need of some disinterested adviser."

He looked so rueful, and withal so humble, that Betty's temper, which had been in momentary danger of giving way, recovered itself.

"Bless you!" said she, laughing, "I can't take care of myself; I am not the raw rustic that you seem to take me for. You must remember that I was treated as a grown-up person ever so long ago, and I have heard and seen a lot more than most girls of my age. Oh, I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

"I hope so—I am sure I hope so!" was all that poor St. Quintin could rejoin.

Indeed, she gave him no opportunity to commit himself further; for at that moment she made a barely perceptible signal to one of Lady Rushcliffe's young men, who had been glancing repeatedly over his shoulder, and who now fell back with alacrity to join Miss Mallet.

The Park was very full that fine morning, and Betty was soon the centre of a group of lively acquaintances, by whom St. Quintin was gradually shouldered into the background. From that obscure post of observation—so painfully symbolic of his actual position with regard to the girl whom he was so ridiculous as to love—he watched and listened to her for a time. He neither saw nor heard anything that could fairly be described as objectionable, even by a somewhat strait-laced bystander; yet there were several innocent young gentlemen whose heads he longed to punch, and whose easy familiarity did not appear to give the offence to Miss Mallet which it ought to have given. Presently Betty glanced at her watch.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed, "I must be off. Granny

is lunching a couple of Cowley fathers, who are bound to be punctual lest they should keep their afternoon congregations waiting, and I have noticed that they don't like being hurried over their food or the port wine which their doctors order them to take before preaching. Where is Mr. St. Quintin? We shall have to call a hansom in Piccadilly, if you don't mind."

St. Quintin certainly did not mind the prospect of escorting Betty to Chesham-place, and was rather relieved to find that her present companions were not to be included among Lady Maria's guests. She took leave of them with a circular sweep of her hand, to which Lady Rushcliffe responded by calling out, in loud, ringing accents:

"I'll pick you up as soon as I can after three o'clock, then. My love to the old lady, and tell her not to wait dinner for you if you aren't back in time."

"Now, I know," remarked Betty, after she and her attendant squire had seated themselves in the hansom which was soon secured, "that you are dying to ask to what resort of wickedness Lady Rushcliffe is going to take me this afternoon. Be calm! We are only going to a sequestered spot to practise riding our bikes. At the same time I should take it as a favour if you would kindly regard this communication as confidential. Granny's prejudices are capricious, and, for some reason or other, she has taken it into her head that no lady who respects herself can be seen upon a bicycle."

It would have been more to the purpose, St. Quintin thought, if Lady Maria had taken it into her head that loss of self-respect was a probable result of being seen with Lady Rushcliffe. However, he held his peace as to that, and promised to do so with regard to Betty's afternoon engagement: although it presently transpired that what she called a "sequestered spot" was a certain riverside club where solitude could scarcely be expected by Sunday visitors.

For the rest, her behaviour during luncheon was all that could be desired, and it appeared to give satisfac-

tion to the two benevolent-looking ascetics, whose glasses she was careful to keep filled. She left the drawing-room immediately after their departure, and, as she did not return, Lady Maria remarked placidly:

"I suppose that child is off somewhere. I wish I could think that she had gone to Evensong."

"Oh, I don't imagine that she has gone to Evensong," said St. Quintin, with a slight smile.

The old lady straightened herself a little in her chair and frowned at him over her spectacles. "Young man," said she, "do you know that you are rather impertinent?"

St. Quintin replied that he had not been aware of being so.

"Well, you are. It is distinctly impertient to imply, as you do with that speaking countenance of yours, that I have no control over Betty, and that I am allowing her to get into bad company."

"I really did not mean to imply all that," St. Quintin declared.

"Oh, didn't you? Well, you might have meant to imply it and yet not have been quite as much in the wrong as I should like you to be. Nevertheless, I am not quite as much in the wrong as you think I am. I know what I can do and what I can't, that's all. It is possible to lead Betty; it is almost impossible to drive her. And, as I remember telling you once before, I believe she is more disposed to be led by you than by anybody else."

St. Quintin shook his head. "I have tried, and it hasn't been much of a success," said he.

"Try again, will you? And if you happen to hear of her doing anything really outrageous—but I don't think she will—just let me know. After all, I *am* in authority over her, and I can exert my authority if need be."

St. Quintin agreed that there could be no question as to that; but the discouraging conviction which he took away with him was that Lady Maria was as power-

less as he himself was to coerce a young woman who had declared to him in so many words her determination to be dictated to by nobody.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AUSTRIA *v.* AUSTRALIA.

Amongst persons tolerably well qualified to judge, Roland Strahan passed at this time for being one of the quickest-witted men in London, and no doubt they had good reasons for paying him that compliment. As, however, they were only acquainted with the business side of the man, they were perhaps unable to detect his limitations, and it may be that youths so intellectually inferior to him as Lord Charles Jocelyn and others could have enlightened him as to one or two points with regard to which he remained in the dark. Certain, at any rate, it is that his wits were not quick enough to inform him precisely how he stood with Lady Middlewood. He knew, of course, and could not help knowing, that he was honoured with a very large share of her thoughts and attention; but what he could not for the life of him determine was whether he had any share in her affections or not. And this, after all, was the less surprising since she herself scarcely knew.

Meanwhile, the methods which she employed for Strahan's subjugation were—more by accident than by design—singularly adroit. It was not, to be sure, a task of any great difficulty to irritate and tantalise a man whose own methods were apt to be brief, sharp, and direct; but Marietta would probably have been less successful if she had really wished to bring him to the point of a declaration. Having no such wish, and being in truth almost as anxious to avoid humiliation as to achieve

the conquest upon which she was bent, she gladly seized every occasion to exert her attractive power over a still reluctant admirer, while preventing him from profiting by the opportunities which she seemed to offer.

In the carrying out of these tactics her father's presence in London was of the greatest service to her. If Colonel Vigne was not already in the room when Strahan, hastening to Arlington-street by appointment, was shown into Lady Middlewood's presence, he was pretty sure to turn up in the course of five minutes or so; and indeed the worthy Colonel, who was far from suspecting that these persistent visits of his were hailed with relief by his daughter, usually wore the deprecating and hang-dog mien of one who is conscious of being an intruder. But he had quite made up his mind that intrude he must. If he did not suspect the whole truth, his suspicions were decided enough as to three quarters of it, and it was not by the impatient frowns of a man whom he had begun to dread and detest that he was likely to be intimidated. That this man was deliberately paying court to his daughter it was impossible to doubt, and that his daughter's vanity was flattered, even though her heart might not yet be touched, was distressingly evident to him. He heard veiled allusions and intercepted quick glances which, to one of his doleful experiences, told their own tale only too distinctly.

When he asked himself what he had better do, he perceived that he had the choice of various courses. He might speak seriously to Marietta; he might breathe a discreet word of warning to his son-in-law; he might boldly pick a quarrel with the would-be disturber of domestic peace; or he might simply sit still for the present and take care that there should be as few private interviews as possible. Now, he did not at all want to speak to Lionel or to Marietta; for he was nervously afraid of letting either of them know why he had especial cause for feeling apprehensive. To pick a quarrel with Strahan would have been delightful if the scene had been Vienna and if Strahan had been an Austrian; but what

is the use of treading upon anybody's toe in a country where duels are no longer fought? So the poor Colonel was fain to content himself with keeping a watchful eye upon the progress of events and sticking obstinately to his chair until his antagonist was forced to quit the field. The two men recognized one another as antagonists, and even exchanged some slight verbal defiances—much to Marietta's amusement.

But at length it occurred to Colonel Vigne that he might perhaps do a little more than he was doing towards carrying the war into the enemy's country. This Strahan—was he not, after all, some sort of financing adventurer? And was it not highly probable that, by making inquiries in the proper quarter, something might be learnt to his disadvantage—something which might perhaps induce Lord Middlewood to decline his future acquaintance? The Colonel's views of financiers and company-promoters were those which largely prevail in the land of his adoption; he thought that the whole lot of them were rogues and that most of them had been guilty, at one time or another, of offences which, if brought home to them, would suffice to send them into penal servitude for a term of years. One morning therefore, he betook himself to the place of business of a certain German banker, upon whom he had a letter of credit and with whom he was personally acquainted, hoping that he might perchance accomplish his purpose in that way. The banker was very civil to Lady Middlewood's father, and was willing to waste a few minutes of his valuable time, since the old gentleman seemed disposed to be chatty; but unhappily he had nothing but the highest admiration to express for Mr. Strahan when that successful personage's name was strategically introduced into the conversation.

"A most remarkable young man," he said, "and one who will go far, unless I am greatly mistaken. A swindler? My dear sir, if any one has called him that, it must be an enemy; he has triumphed too completely to have no enemies. But he has also friends—your distin-

guished son-in-law amongst the number—who, I am sure, will answer to you for him. If you think of purchasing any of the Company's shares——"

But the Colonel had no intention of employing his small capital in that way, and he left this Balaam of a banker somewhat abruptly. Marching westwards, with a downcast air, and ruminating over the contrariety of things, he almost ran into the arms of the only man in London who had, so far, shown a disposition to back him up, and out of the fulness of his heart he supplemented his greeting by an anxious question.

"If you aren't in a hurry, Mr. St. Quintin, would you mind telling me why you said, the other day, that that fellow Strahan was not what you call straight?"

St. Quintin was in rather a hurry, and he did not, on being thus challenged, see his way to justifying a vague charge. He looked wistfully down the Embankment, which was the scene of his encounter with his interrogator, as if he would fain escape; but he was himself too straight in all his dealings to shirk awkward situations; so he frankly admitted that he had spoken over hastily.

"I know nothing against Strahan as a man of business," he said; "very likely there is nothing to know. I ought to have warned you that I am a prejudiced witness."

"Yes, yes; but why are you prejudiced?" the Colonel asked. "That is what I should like to get at, if you have no objection to letting me hear. There are plenty of arrant rogues who are clever enough to realise that honesty is the best policy, and whose business transactions are fair and above-board; but it doesn't follow that one should admit them to one's intimacy. In a word, I don't altogether fancy Mr. Strahan, who is for ever in my son-in-law's house, and you have given me your own opinion of him. Is it permissible to beg for your reasons?"

"Well," answered St. Quintin, after a moment of hesitation, "I will say behind Strahan's back what I

should be ready to say to his face, if necessary. There was a very nasty business when we were all at Oxford together—an unfortunate girl who was driven to commit suicide, and with whom it was notorious that Strahan used to spend a good deal of his time. I have no right to say that he was guilty—as a matter of fact, another man, whom nobody had suspected, saw fit to take to his heels; but he behaved with a callousness which I didn't like, and I didn't like the way in which he contrived to drag Lionel into the affair either. It is true that I had always disliked him, independently of that, and I have no doubt Lionel would tell you that anything I say about Strahan ought to be taken with several grains of salt. All the same, I must stick to my opinion, and I quite agree with you that it is best not to be too intimate with him."

St. Quintin, it should be mentioned, fully understood the nature of Colonel Vigne's anxiety, in which his own observations had led him to participate. He thought it would be a very good thing if Lady Middlewood's father were to adopt measures for which her husband apparently saw no need.

But what practical measures did the information which he had received place it in the eager Colonel's power to adopt? It was scarcely to be supposed that Marietta would be influenced by the disinterment of a buried scandal which, after all, had left no stain upon Mr. Strahan's character, nor was she likely to believe that her friend was a heartless libertine simply because one who did not know him nearly as well as she did chose to say so. The Colonel, however, did not contemplate a direct appeal to his daughter, being perfectly aware that such a line of action could only result in failure.

"Well," he said, after having elicited from St. Quintin somewhat fuller particulars relating to the Oxford tragedy than have been given above. "I'm much obliged to you. What you say quite confirms my personal impression, and although, as you very properly

point out, the man is entitled to a verdict of 'not guilty' in that especial case, I can see that you think 'not proven' would be nearer the mark."

"I feel like a backbiter," answered St. Quintin a little compunctiously; "but, as I told you just now, I am willing to repeat to Strahan's face anything that I have ever said behind his back, and I believe he knows pretty well what I think of him."

No doubt he did; and he was destined, as it happened, to hear very soon what Colonel Vigne thought of him. Not that it was with any such intention in his mind that that perplexed veteran bent his steps towards Arlington-street a few hours later; but the precise time and place for a battle, as his military experience had taught him, can seldom be determined in advance, and, slenderly equipped though he was for offensive purposes, events led him to risk an attack in force without further delay.

In other words, he was so alarmed by what he saw, on his arrival, that he did not think it would be safe to postpone operations any longer. Strahan and Marietta were sitting very close together when he interrupted them; they pushed their respective chairs back, and one of them coloured visibly. In reality, she had merely been bending over her visitor's shoulder to peruse a letter which he had received from the Colonial Secretary, and which was couched in terms so flattering that he had been tempted to show it to her; but how was a suspicious intruder to know that? The Colonel, while endeavouring to maintain his customary demeanour of brisk geniality, was horribly uneasy, and said to himself that—hang it all!—he would bring the fellow to book before he lost sight of him.

That the old gentleman would resolutely sit him out Strahan knew by previous experience; so he was not long in picking up his hat and preparing to take his leave. Nothing could have been more conventional and decorous that his manner of so doing; yet there was a suggestiveness in his look and his voice, while he held

Marietta's hand, which caused the third person's gray moustache to twitch and bristle up like the back of a bellicose terrier.

"Will there be any hope of finding you at home to-morrow, if I can get away from my work by five o'clock?" he asked.

And the Colonel inwardly replied, "No, my fine fellow, there won't; for your visits to this house are going to be put a stop to." Aloud he said, "Perhaps you are walking my way, Mr. Strahan?"

To which the other, who detected a challenge in the question, and who really did not think it worth the trouble of taking up, replied: "Well, I am going to walk across the Park; I have to leave cards at a house in Eaton-square."

"That will just suit me," declared the Colonel, whom any other direction would have suited equally well, and who, as Strahan knew, would in the natural course of things have headed for the opposite point of the compass.

"Confound the old fool!" was the latter's reflection; "now he is going to attack me, I suppose. But, after all, I don't know what he can possibly say. He will hardly make himself so ridiculous as to state plainly that he is afraid of my compromising his daughter!"

Nevertheless, that was exactly what Colonel Vigne meant to do. He was, in truth, afraid that Marietta was in serious danger of being compromised, and he was not in the least afraid of appearing ridiculous. He had not, indeed, given a thought to the figure which he individually was likely to cut in the approaching colloquy. The two men left the house by the garden gate, which opened upon the Green-park, and after they had advanced a few steps in silence, the Colonel pointed with his walking-stick to a vacant bench.

"With your permission," said he, "we will sit down. I have a word or two to say to you."

To the surprise and a little to the discomfiture of his companion, he actually said what he had to say within

the limits of a word or two, and this was simply that he must request Mr. Strahan to discontinue his too noticeable and assiduous attentions to Lady Middlewood.

"You will tell me, I dare say, that you mean no harm," he added. "Very well; but your conduct is likely to do my daughter harm, whether you mean it or not, and I wish you to understand quite clearly that that cannot be permitted. You will, I hope, be so good as to take this hint and act upon it. Otherwise I must have recourse to more forcible methods."

Strahan was almost as much moved to respect as he was to amusement by the demands of this very peremptory old gentleman; for he liked a straightforward adversary, though he could not always afford to be straightforward himself. In the present instance it was obviously out of the question for him to be so.

"I am sorry that you should have taken such unwarrantable notions into your head, Colonel Vigne," he replied, "and glad that since they have found their way there, you should have selected a victim of my reticence and discretion. You may depend upon me not to mention this to Lord and Lady Middlewood, who, I am afraid, would scarcely thank you for your interference; but you really must not expect me to take any further notice of what you have said. The friendship which exists between your daughter and me is, of course, absolutely innocent; but even if it were not, I fail to see by what 'forcible methods' you could put an end to it."

The Colonel waved his hand impatiently. "I have told you already," said he, "that I was prepared for that answer. You were bound to make it, and—not to mince matters—I don't believe a word of it. I have lived too long and seen too much to accept any assurance as to the innocence of your intentions. With regard to coercion, I can, if necessary, speak to my son-in-law; though I make you welcome to the admission that I should prefer to get rid of you quietly. Moreover, I happen to be cognisant of certain circumstances con-

nected with your past life which is at present no business of mine to talk about, but which, if divulged, would probably cause a good many doors to be shut in your face. And I take it that you would rather abandon a flirtation which, believe me, will be stopped by hook or by crook, than risk losing the social prestige which is of so much importance to you."

"Dear me!" said Strahan, with an air of indolent surprise and entertainment; "what circumstances, if one may ask?"

The Colonel looked him straight in the eyes and replied curtly and sternly, "I presume that you would not like the whole truth to be known about the death of Maggie Field."

As a sheer piece of bluff, that was not badly imagined. Had the subject been introduced less abruptly, and had the name of Colonel Vigne's informant been mentioned, nothing would have been more easy than to dismiss the story contemptuously, as no secret nor any possible source of disquietude to one who had virtually obtained a public acquittal. But coming, as it did, without the slightest warning, the shot told. For an instant, though only for an instant, Strahan looked startled and defiant; the pupils of his eyes dilated and contracted rapidly, his lower jaw pushed itself forward, and the Colonel's inward and gleeful comment upon these manifestations was "Aha! I thought as much. The whole truth is *not* known, then!"

"You see, Mr. Strahan," he resumed, "that I can, if I am driven to it, bring pressure to bear upon you, and——"

"I see," interrupted the other, who had quickly recovered his composure, "that you have discovered a mare's nest. Somebody has been telling you lies, perhaps—it really doesn't matter. But since you are not too proud to use threats, Colonel Vigne, and since you have been pleased to allude to circumstances connected with my past life, I see no reason why I should not imitate you. Supposing, for example, that I wanted to bring

pressure to bear upon you, how would it be if I were to enlighten Middlewood and others as to circumstances in your own past life? How would it be if I were to tell them what, I believe, admits of unquestionable proof—that you did not marry the late Mrs. Vigne in time to legitimise your daughter? I don't know whether that would have the effect of causing any doors to be shut in Lady Middlewood's face; I am sure I hope not, for it is evident that no blame attaches to her. But I doubt whether Middlewood would be persuaded to forgive a man who has practised such a piece of deception upon him."

Poor Colonel Vigne's cheeks had assumed an ashen hue. The secret which—for his daughter's sake and not without many misgivings—he had decided to keep to himself was in the possession of the enemy; his Novara had been converted into a Sadowa; instead of imposing terms, he must now act a suppliant's part. Something he might have pleaded in extenuation of his conduct, both recent and remote, his daughter's illegitimacy having been the result of events beyond his control; but of what avail could such pleas be to him in the present crisis? All he could do was to draw himself up, like one who is prepared to receive his death-blow, and say, "Well, sir?"

"Well," answered Strahan, who was really a little touched by the spectacle of the old man's despair, "you shouldn't have threatened me. Don't do it again, please, and you won't provoke me to take steps which I would very much rather not take. For the rest, you will have to allow me a free hand. You have a low opinion of me, and not too high a one of Lady Middlewood, it seems. I am sorry for that; but really I can't help it. So long as you refrain from molesting me, I shall not molest you; more than that it is impossible for me to say. And now," he added, consulting his watch, "I must be off. Good evening."

The Colonel remained, silent and defeated, on his bench, neither accepting nor declining the conditions of

peace offered to hm. As for Strahan, as he strode briskly across the grass, he said to himself: "This is a striking proof of the usefulness of keeping *dossiers*. I think I have got back the full value of that greasy dinner with my Garibaldian fiddler. I wonder what the old fellow knows about poor Maggie!—I wonder who could have told him! But it's of no consequence; the gag is in his mouth."

CHAPTER XXX.

BETTY PUTS HER FOOT IN IT.

Raro antecedentem scelestum deseruit pede Pœna claudo. As Colonel Vigne sat ruefully on the bench where Strahan had left him, that hackneyed quotation from a Roman poet came back to his memory, an echo from the dim and distant days when a classical education had been in process of being whipped into him, and when he had as yet had no thought of seeking his fortune under a foreign flag. Yet he could not feel that the adjective was altogether applicable to his case —not, at any rate, applicable to him so far as his original offence against established laws of morality was concerned. The beautiful and (if the whole truth must be told about her) not over prudish Italian girl, with whom he had contracted a romantic *liaison* during the brief breathing spaces of a campaign, had doubtless been wronged by him in a conventional sense; but he had made reparation at the earliest possible moment. Was it any fault of his that that moment had not come early enough to save her reputation, and that a marriage, which her parents would certainly have forbidden in the first instance, had ultimately been solemnised after a flight, at which they had been only too glad to connive? Was he to blame for having been ordered off to assist in quelling

a Hungarian insurrection, and for the non-delivery of appealing letters to which, even if he had received them, he could not have left his regiment to respond? As a man of honour, he had hastened to do all that could be done, and in subsequent years he had sometimes had reason to think that such punishment as might be his due had overtaken him. But of course his conduct had been culpable towards the man, not less honourable than he, who, after so long a lapse of time, had demanded his innocent daughter's hand in marriage. He ought to have honestly told Lionel why the Magliacci would have nothing to do with the Vignes, and why Marietta was scarcely a fit person to become the wife of the future Viscount Middlewood.

"At least, I suppose so," he sighed; "I suppose that is what most people would say. But in spite of the Bible and the Church, I can't admit that children ought to be made to suffer for the sins of their parents; that is neither reason nor justice. Besides, it was such an old, old story, and almost everybody who was acquainted with it was dead! Who could have foreseen that it would be revived at this time of day by the very man of all others whom I would have given an arm or a leg to keep in ignorance of it?"

Anyhow, no conceivable good purpose could be served by making a tardy confession to Lionel, and Strahan, it appeared, was willing to hold his tongue. Upon conditions, to be sure—conditions of which the Colonel was glad to remember that he had signified no acceptance, yet which practically enforced themselves. "Turn me out of Lord Middlewood's house, and the chances are that you, if not your daughter into the bargain, will very soon follow me," had been Strahan's menace, and there was no disputing its cogency. Active hostilities must needs be abandoned. What, then, remained to be done? Nothing, evidently, except to mount guard with daily assiduity, to convey discreet warnings to Marietta, and perhaps to breathe just one word in season to her husband. It was not a programme which held out any

great promise of success; but as it was the only possible programme, the best had to be made of it.

From that day forth, therefore, the harassed and apprehensive Colonel became almost as constant a visitor to Arlington-street as if, in defiance of his principles, he had been his son-in-law's guest. He could not complain of not being made welcome. Marietta always seemed delighted to see him; often she took him out driving with her, and she persuaded him to accompany her to many entertainments from which he would have excused himself a year before. But to those precautionary representations which he lost no opportunity of addressing to her, she turned a deaf ear. She either could not or would not understand what he meant; he did not venture to be explicit, and although it was by no means every day that Mr. Strahan called to pay his respects, there might, of course, easily be meetings of which the vigilant Colonel had no knowledge. When he did chance to encounter his enemy, the latter was perfectly civil and good humoured, making no allusion, direct or indirect, to the interview which had ended so triumphantly for him, and apparently taking it for granted that his terms had been agreed to. The Colonel would have been almost tempted to believe that his alarm was as groundless as Strahan had declared it to be, had he not, unfortunately for him, been familiar with certain symptoms which Marietta from time to time displayed. A burnt child fears the fire, and poor Colonel Vigne had burnt his fingers too badly in days gone by to be the dupe of any feminine artifices.

If the uncomplimentary epithet of dupe had been earned by anybody in that house, perhaps its master deserved to be so stigmatised. Occupied from morning to night with duties and pleasures which did not attract his wife, Lionel was not a great deal in her company, and, when there, he certainly failed to see what other people were beginning to remark upon. What he did notice, and was glad to notice, was that her spirits had improved; it never would have occurred to him to seek

for the cause of that improvement in the attentions of a man who was his friend, who (as he believed) was a confirmed woman-hater, and of whom she had more than once spoken disparagingly. To be thoroughly honest and honourable is inevitably to be, at least once, the dupe of those who are not thus handicapped.

But others, as has been said, had begun to comment upon the circumstance that when Lady Middlewood appeared in public, Strahan was generally to be seen at her elbow, and these comments came to the ears of Betty Mallet, whose own observation, indeed, lent support to them. Now, when anything struck Betty, she was very apt to mention it, and in this instance she did so without hesitation or compunction, to her sister-in-law.

"I have been freely told of late," she remarked, "that I am a flirt. It isn't true; but that is neither here nor there. I am accused of flirting because I see no reason why I shouldn't be friendly with men whom I like; so if such nasty things are said to me, who at least am a spinster and who at least don't keep one particular man for ever in my pocket, I am afraid even worse will be said about you, unless you give Mr. Strahan a hint to stand clear."

Marietta frowned. "Who commissioned you to give me this advice?" she inquired.

"Don't get on your hind legs," returned Betty composedly: "nobody commissioned me; I don't accept commissions of that sort. But I thought I would make so bold as to flutter a danger-signal under your nose, in case of your not being aware that there is danger ahead."

"You are really very kind," said Marietta.

"Not at all; I only do as I would be done by."

This, Marietta thought, must surely be a figure of speech; for if there was a thing which Betty would stand from nobody, it was interference. However, it was the simplest matter in the world to put her sister-in-law's sincerity to the test, and she proceeded to do so—with the anticipated result.

"Many thanks," said Betty; "I'll bear your remarks

in mind, and you might make a greater mistake than to ponder over mine. But I think we won't lecture one another again; lectures are so horribly liable to degenerate into arguments, and arguments into quarrels!"

The two ladies did not quarrel; but one of them, who had not forgotten the marked predilection which Strahan had evinced at one time for the other's society, and who doubted whether the counsels addressed to her had been wholly disinterested, was somewhat ruffled by the above slight passage of arms. That, no doubt, was why a favour which Miss Mallet called to request some days later was not conceded.

Betty, who arrived early in the afternoon, and who congratulated herself upon her good luck in finding her sister-in-law at home, was, it appeared, in something of a quandary. A party, consisting of various young men and only two ladies, had been made up to dine at Hampton Court and bicycle back to town by moonlight; at the last moment Lady Rushcliffe had telegraphed to say that she was going to bed with a splitting headache, and what Betty hoped was that, if her sister-in-law had no other engagement, she would be so very good-natured as to drive or train down to the place of rendezvous and act as chaperone.

"But I don't know how to ride a bicycle," observed Marietta.

"Oh, that doesn't signify," returned the girl; "you can drive home, and I'll keep alongside of the carriage. Of course, if I had these men's addresses, I might put them off; but I haven't, and it would be rather too bad to leave them in the lurch. Especially as I believe they really hate cycling, and are only sacrificing themselves to please me."

"I should have thought," said Marietta, "that Lady Maria would have been the proper person to take charge of you, under the circumstances."

"I am afraid she would be only too proper a person. Granny has a receptive mind, and I have educated her up to a good deal; but, oddly enough, I haven't been

able to conquer her prejudice against bicycles, which she looks upon as plebeian, if not immoral. So—between ourselves—it wasn't thought advisable to furnish her with full particulars as to this little jaunt. All she knows is that I am going to dine quietly with a few friends at Hampton Court, and that she can retire to roost as early as she likes."

Upon hearing this, Marietta saw fit to declare that she could be no party to clandestine schemes, and that her sister-in-law's engagement would have to be cancelled. It was not, perhaps, very kind of her to adopt so uncompromising an attitude; but that she was within her right could not be questioned; and Betty, after some unavailing entreaties, took her leave, saying, good-humouredly enough:

"Well, I forgive you; though I do think you might have found it in your heart to lend a hand to a distressed fellow creature. I tremble to think of what Charlie Jocelyn will do when he discovers that he has been thrown over."

It was in part because she honestly believed that that spoilt youth would be furious, and in part because she herself was so little accustomed to being thwarted, that Miss Mallet, after leaving Arlington-street, made up her mind to take an utterly inadmissible step. Notwithstanding the emancipation from ordinary restraints which she had of late paraded, and taken some pleasure in parading, Betty was in many respects more simple and innocent than other girls. She knew, indeed, that it would be a rather bold measure to drive to the Waterloo Station, whither her bicycle had already been dispatched, and to take her ticket for Hampton Court; but, upon the whole, she regarded this as the lesser of two evils. Of course, she could not dine with those young men; but she could meet them and explain what had happened, and then there would be no great harm, she supposed, in their riding back to London together. Had she not, times out of mind, ridden back from hunting with an attendant cavalier?

For what followed, Lord Charles Jocelyn must be held alone to blame—and, as a matter of fact, he was blamed to an extent, and after a fashion which, one is glad to know, made a humble and repentant man of him. He, at all events, was neither simple nor innocent; he could not but be fully aware that it was a monstrous thing to persuade Miss Mallet to carry out the original programme without even the dubious protection of Lady Rushcliffe's presence. But his conscience was probably solved by the plea which has solved many another conscience—that it would be great fun, and that nobody but themselves would ever know anything about it. He represented that the dinner had been ordered, and could not now be countermanded; that one must dine somewhere; that from Hampton Court to London is a very lone stretch of road to cover on an empty stomach; and that, really, a dressed-up boltser would answer any purpose that Lady Rushcliffe could have been expected to serve. Finally, he answered for the discretion of his companions (which was tolerably audacious of him), and professed himself quite unable to see what difference there was between bicycle-riding and satisfying the cravings of nature in a spirit of sociability. So Betty ended by allowing her scruples to be overruled. She was young enough, self-willed enough, and foolish enough to employ that argument which has been so frequently used to stifle troublesome misgivings by members of her sex—"So long as I am doing nothing wrong, what can it matter?" As if anything really mattered, except being found out!

Betty enjoyed that little dinner very much. Her fellow-revellers—of whom there were but a couple, in addition to Lord Charles—were capital company, and took no liberties. Doubtless they realised the nature of the situation, and, whatever they may have thought of Miss Mallet's prudence, were under no temptation to treat her otherwise than respectfully. The dinner, about which Lord Charles (under Lady Rushcliffe's instructions) had taken some trouble, was excellent; the

champagne was better than might have been expected; and the jokes, if not strikingly novel or brilliant, amply sufficed to excite the hilarity of four light-hearted young persons. Even Lord Charles did not attempt to make love to Betty—having discovered, much to his regret, some time before, that the charming heiress had nothing but friendship to offer him—and the whole affair was as harmless and as delightful to those who took part in it, as an escapade which entails the possibility of a subsequent whipping is to a lot of schoolboys.

But the escapades of young ladies cannot, unluckily, be punished and paid for by methods so summary; and Betty Mallet was destined to be taught how dangerous a thing it is to defy the not too strict laws of modern conventionality. She was leaning upon her machine in front of the hotel where the dinner had taken place, while Lord Charles and his friends were regulating the account within, when her enjoyment of the soft night air, and of a prospective spin through Bushy Park, was interrupted by the sudden appearance in the bright moonlight of a gentleman whom she recognised, and who started visibly on recognising her.

"Oh," she muttered under her breath, "isn't this just my luck!"

It really was rather bad luck that St. Quintin should have a widowed aunt who resided in Hampton Court Palace, and that he should have chosen the particular evening in question to run down from London and dine with her; but everybody must have noticed that coincidences of that vexatious kind only occur when the chances against their occurrence are well-nigh incalculable. Of course, he had no sooner been informed of what Miss Mallet was doing there than he wanted to know who her companions were; and when these had been duly stated for his benefit by a young woman who was incapable of telling lies, he rejoined—

"Yes; but I mean what ladies are with you?"

"There aren't any ladies," answered Betty, with

the calmness of despair. "There was to have been one, but she telegraphed to say that if she lifted her aching head from the pillow she would be sick; so, as I couldn't get anybody to take her place, I came down without her. Don't be shocked—or rather, be as shocked as I know you can't help being; but don't betray me."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed St. Quintin, aghast, "you *have* put your foot into it this time! What can have tempted you to get yourself into such a horrible mess! It's more serious than you think for—a great deal more serious. Do you really mean to say that you have been dining in a public room with these three fellows?"

"I really mean to say that I have been dining in a public house with them," replied the girl defiantly. "We had a private room, if that makes any difference."

"None worth speaking of. Lady Maria will have to be told, you know; there's no help for it."

"She will not be told, unless you are sneak enough to tell her. Charlie Jocelyn has bound the others down to secrecy."

St. Quintin shook his head despondently. "They won't keep their promise," he said; "nobody ever keeps promises of that sort. Each of them will tell at least one person in strict confidence, and as the one person is sure to be a woman, you may safely multiply her by a dozen, which makes six and thirty. By the time that your grandmother hears the story it will be quite a dozen times worse than it is; so the sooner she is enlightened as to the actual facts the better."

"Very well," returned Betty; "go and enlighten her, then. I should be sorry to serve you such an ill turn as you propose to serve me; but I don't choose to appeal to you for mercy. I quite understand that I am in your power."

St. Quintin made a forlorn gesture. "What you don't seem to understand," he remarked, "is that you are in the power of that fellow Jocelyn, whose head I should like to break, and his friends'. It is easy enough

for me to hold my tongue—God knows *I* have no wish to get you into trouble!—but the question is, what can be done now to save you from—from calumny? Believe me, much the best plan will be for you to make a clean breast of it at once to Lady Maria. Then at least she won't be able to accuse you of having deceived her. If you will give me your word of honour to do that, I will give you mine to remain mute."

Betty, after a moment of consideration, saw fit to agree to these terms. Indeed, it was evident, now that she came to think of it, that she must either tell her grandmother the truth or a falsehood, and she could not but perceive that St. Quintin's advice was sound. That, however, did not prevent her from being seriously displeased with him for having turned up at such an inopportune moment, and she dismissed him with scant ceremony.

"Please, go away now," said she. "The others will be here presently, and you are so stupid and disagreeable that I believe you would be capable of reading them a lecture."

St. Quintin felt capable of reading them a lecture with his fists or his walking-stick; but, that being out of the question, the next best thing to do was to take himself off. He withdrew accordingly, leaving behind him a culprit whose enjoyment of the moonlight he had very effectually spoilt. Shortly afterwards, Miss Mallet said to her assembled friends:

"By the way, consider yourselves released from any obligation to keep this thing dark. I hate mysteries, and I don't see any need for them. For my own part, I mean to tell granny what I have been about as soon as I get home."

CHAPTER XXXI.

JUDGMENT PRONOUNCED BY THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY.

"I SAY, you know," began Lord Charles, manœuvring his bicycle alongside of that on which Miss Mallet was progressing at a high rate of speed, "I wouldn't go and tell the old lady about this, if I were you—I wouldn't really! What's the use of having rows? And you may depend upon it that we shall none of us split."

He was a young man who was not easily made to feel uncomfortable; but he had been rendered a little so by Betty's surprising announcement, and still more by her sudden and unaccountable change of mood. She seemed, for some reason or other, to have become as cross as a bear—which was really rather inconsiderate of her, seeing that they had so many miles of road before them, and that the sole object of this fatiguing nocturnal excursion was the promotion of jollity. And certainly it was no very amiable countenance that Betty turned towards her neighbour.

"You talk as if we had been concerned in a burglary together!" she exclaimed. "I don't know whether you are aware of it, but it is rather impertinent and rather insulting of you to speak like that. I shouldn't have dined with you if I had been ashamed of what I was doing."

"Well, but," remonstrated the other, "hang it all; you know——"

"Oh, I know well enough!" Betty cut him short by exclaiming in a very snappish tone of voice. "I know it was an idiotic thing to do, and I know I agreed with you that we had better keep it to ourselves. But I have changed my mind. Upon the whole, I prefer to make everybody's hair stand on end by confessing what I have done and taking the consequences—which will be most unpleasant."

"Oh, all right!" answered Lord Charles huffily.

"Only you said just now that you were not ashamed of what you had done."

"I am not a bit ashamed," Betty declared; "I am slightly disgusted, that's all. But we may as well drop the subject; it isn't a nice one."

Lord Charles said to himself that that was so like a woman. As jolly as possible one minute, and the next, without rhyme or reason, ready to play the very dickens all round! He foresaw that trouble both to herself and (what was more important) to him would come of Betty's recklessness, and he could only hope that a night's reflection would cause her to change her mind a second time. He essayed a further mild expostulation when, at the end of their not very joyous moonlit ride, he bestowed Miss Mallet and her bicycle in the four-wheeler which he had called at her request.

"Why go and throw the fat into the fire? It will be all right if you will only leave well alone."

But Betty shook her head impatiently. In the first place, she had realised that what had been done had been anything but well done, and that self-respect demanded an avowal; in the second place, she had given her word of honour to adopt the course which Lord Charles deprecated. The nearer she drew towards the necessary adoption of that course the less it smiled upon her; but, whatever she might be, she was no coward; so immediately on her arrival in Chesham-place she marched into the drawing-room, where Lady Maria was placidly nodding over a book, and fired off her statement point-blank.

"Granny," she began, with a slightly tremulous laugh, "I'm like the fat boy in Pickwick, I'm going to make your flesh creep! I didn't tell you before I started that I had had a telegram from Lady Rushcliffe to say that she was seedy and couldn't go with me to Hampton Court. I tried to get Marietta to come in her place; but she wouldn't, and so—I went all by myself."

Lady Maria, who was only half awake, did not at once take in the full significance of this terrible announcement. She removed her spectacles, which she slowly rubbed, while endeavouring to recall details which had escaped her memory.

"Hampton Court?" she replied. "Was it to Hampton Court that you were going? And you went by yourself, you say? Well, but you haven't been by yourself all this time, I suppose."

"I have not," answered Betty, gloomily. "I have been dining with Charlie Jocelyn and two other men, and after dinner we rode back to London on our bicycles. There—now you know the worst."

Lady Maria's spectacles slipped out of her hands, which were instinctively thrown upwards. "This can't be true!" she ejaculated.

"It is, though," said Betty; "it's the simple, unvarnished truth. If there were any use in my saying that I am sorry, I would say so; for that would be the truth, too. But I don't suppose you would believe me. I know I deserve to be scolded; so scold away, and I won't interrupt."

The old lady, however, did not avail herself of this generous permission. The case was far too grave to be dealt with by mere scolding, and her consternation was too deep to find relief in that way.

"I have never heard," she groaned, "that there was actual insanity in the family, though many of the Mallets have been rather eccentric; but this can only be accounted for upon the supposition that you have ceased to be responsible for your actions. In fact, I don't see what other excuse we are to make for you! To dine with three young men and spend half the night in tearing about on wheels in their company!—oh, it is absurd to talk about there being safety in numbers; *that* won't help you! And concealment is out of the question. Who could hope to hush up a scandal which each one of those young men, you may be very sure, will have related in

confidence to somebody else before this time to-morrow?"

"I shouldn't have thought that they would be so mean," said Betty; "but Mr. St. Quintin is quite of your opinion. According to him nobody ever keeps secrets of this kind."

"Mr. St. Quintin? What does he know about it?"

"He knows all about it," answered Betty. "I was standing alone outside the hotel at Hampton Court, after dinner, when he dropped upon me suddenly out of a clear sky and began asking questions which I had to answer. In fact, it was he who made me promise to confess my sins to you. He gave me to understand, in fact, that he would tell you if I didn't."

Lady Maria stooped down and picked up her spectacles, which she placed upon her nose. Probably she was aware that by gazing over them at the offender she could impart some additional terrors to the severity of her aspect.

"So you did not intend to confess to me," she remarked sternly. "I am sorry for this, Betty; I have hitherto been under the impression that however wilful and disobedient you might be you were at least above taking refuge in deceit. But now it seems that I should have been kept entirely in the dark, but for the accident of Mr. St. Quintin's having discovered you."

This accusation, which touched Betty in a tender spot, was all the more hard to bear because she was unable to meet it with a direct denial.

"I shouldn't have told you a lie, granny," was all that she could plead for herself; "but I suppose, as you say, I did intend to keep you in the dark. I thought you would take it for granted that Lady Rushcliffe had been there, and—and I really didn't mean any harm."

It was not often that Miss Betty gave way to tears, but her blue eyes were suspiciously clouded now, and the corners of her mouth were quivering piteously. "Is

it, after all, such a *very* dreadful thing to have done?" she asked, in a small, uncertain voice.

"My dear," answered her grandmother, whose heart was not hard enough to hold out against these manifestations of repentance, "it is such a very dreadful thing that I am quite sure you would never have done it, except upon some mad impulse. What step we are to take I can't imagine! I must send for your brother the first thing to-morrow morning and consult him. Meanwhile there is no good in crying. We had better go to bed, both of us, and try to sleep."

Lady Maria added a few injunctions with regard to the use of a Manual of Devotion which she had recently presented to her grandchild, and hinted that absolution might ultimately be obtained from a priest of the Church. But in truth the good lady was less disquieted about the religious than about the social aspect of this unfortunate affair; for she feared that social absolution would not be likely to be accorded upon very easy terms.

Nor had Lionel, who arrived, in obedience to his grandmother's summons, immediately after breakfast the next morning, much comfort to offer her. He was greatly displeased—far more so than Betty had expected him to be—and he expressed himself in uncompromising language. Such an escapade, he said, could not possibly be explained away; there was nothing to be done but to admit the whole truth—which might or might not be believed—and to trust that it would be forgotten within a year.

"As far as the remainder of this season is concerned," he added, "I should strongly advise you to sacrifice it and go home at once."

"But won't that look rather as if I was being packed off in disgrace?" Betty ventured to ask.

"Yes, I should say so," returned her brother pitilessly. "What else do you deserve, pray? I wish there were any chance of that fellow Jocelyn's getting what he deserves! However, I shall speak to his father, with

whom I hope he will have a rather nasty quarter of an hour."

It may be mentioned here that Lord Charles's father, who was a terrible old personage, and upon whom the young man was wholly dependent, proved as furious as Lionel could have desired him to be. He at first proposed to order his son to marry the young lady forthwith, but, upon being given to understand that this form of reparation would be scarcely acceptable to her family, he had recourse to pecuniary and other penalties which effectually put a stop to the delinquent's fun for a good many months.

Meanwhile Lionel walked across to the Home Office in search of St. Quintin, whom he drew away from the labours of correspondence for a few minutes to thank and consult.

"It isn't too pleasant," he remarked, "that one's sister should have been caught by anybody in the act of making a desperate fool of herself; but since she was to be caught I am glad you were the man to catch her. I have advised my grandmother to take her straight back to Chelton. Under the circumstances that is the only thing to be done, don't you think so?"

St. Quintin supposed it was. He looked a little down in the mouth, for, indeed, he felt it rather hard that he should be the instrument selected by Providence both for banishing and for incurring the displeasure of one whom he would cheerfully have made any sacrifice to serve.

"I am afraid Miss Mallet will never forgive me," he said ruefully.

"Oh, I don't know," answered Lionel. "If she has any sense at all she will recognise that she is deeply indebted to you; but really I begin to think that she has absolutely no sense! One could understand her having behaved in this way better if there were any reason to suppose that she had taken a fancy to that young ass Jocelyn——"

"Are you sure that she hasn't?" interrupted St. Quintin, with subdued eagerness.

"Well, yes; I'm pretty sure. As sure as one can be about anything in which a woman is concerned. But that, as I say, makes her foolhardiness the more inexplicable. Of course everybody will be talking about this stupid business to-morrow. I don't know that we can do anything, except admit that she has been a very silly girl and that she is being made to smart for it. I'm all for telling the truth, whatever happens."

So was St. Quintin. He observed that nobody who knew Miss Mallet would be in the least likely to accuse her of anything worse than silliness, and ventured to add that nobody who entertained a regard for the integrity of his features would be wise to accuse her even of that when he was present.

At this Lionel laughed a little. "Do you propose to punch the heads of a score or so of ladies?" he asked. "I am afraid we must not hope to be able to stop their tongues; all we can trust to is the shortness of their memories. Oh, dear me! what a much more peaceful and comfortable planet this would be if there were no women on the surface of it!"

He did not quite mean that; still he was a good deal annoyed, and St. Quintin did not seem to have much to offer him in the way of comfort or advice. He, therefore, resolved to lunch at home and talk matters over with his wife, who, to be sure, laboured under the disadvantage of being a woman, but who, for that very reason, might be able to suggest some method of coming to terms with others of her troublesome sex.

On reaching Arlington-street, he encountered his father-in-law, who was just turning away from the door, and whose countenance did not wear its habitual air of beaming good humour.

"Hullo, Colonel!" said Lionel, "where are you off to? Can't you stay and lunch with us?"

"I was asked to lunch," Colonel Vigne replied; "but I suppose Marietta must have forgotten that she

invited me, for she is not expected home, it appears, until late in the afternoon. I wonder where she has gone!" he added, with a troubled look.

Lionel had not the slightest idea, and did not seem to think that it signified much. "Come in with me, anyhow," said he. "There will be something for us to eat, I suppose, though we weren't expected."

The Colonel nodded assent. An opportunity was being offered to him which he felt that he ought not to neglect, and when, after a time, Lionel, who could think of nothing else, told him about Betty's scrape, he began to see his way.

"My dear fellow," said he, "women, according to my experience of them, are always getting into scrapes, more or less serious. It is really their nature to be like that, and perhaps, if the whole truth were known, they can't help it. At any rate, before blaming them, we ought to ask ourselves whether those whose duty it is to protect them from harm have not overlooked that duty. Your sister, I would stake my life upon it, is as innocent a young lady as there is in England; yet see what trouble she has got into through—if you will excuse my saying so—lack of proper supervision. Has it never struck you that our dear Marietta, for instance, is left rather more to her own devices than is quite safe?"

Lionel stared. He liked the old gentleman and was willing to put up with a good deal from him; but he did not like anybody to adopt that tone in speaking of his wife.

"No," he answered rather curtly, "I can't say that it has. Do you mean anything in particular?"

The poor Colonel meant something in particular; but, as we know, it was a matter of some difficulty and danger for him to say precisely what he meant. However he had to do the best he could; so he sighed, lighted a cigarette (for this conversation took place after the two men had finished their luncheon), and embarked upon a very careful and circuitous statement, the upshot

of which was that, in his opinion, Mr. Strahan was rather too frequently at the house.

"I am not suggesting," he concluded, "that there is any cause for real alarm; only I am an old man; I have seen more of the world than you have—and I do know—I can't help knowing—how important it often is to check these things in time. It would be so easy for you, without saying anything, to leave London!"

That, however, would not be so very easy, and certainly Lionel was not at all alarmed. He was even rather amused that Strahan, who was anything but a lady's man, and in whose favour, as he believed, Marietta was by no means predisposed, should be made the subject of this well-meant warning. But, to humour the old fellow, he replied:

"Very well; I'll give Marietta a hint. Probably she will have no objection at all to being out in future when Strahan calls. As far as that goes, I shouldn't mind speaking to Strahan himself, if it were necessary; though I suspect he would be more astonished than flattered at being taken for a Don Juan."

"For Heaven's sake, don't dream of doing that!" exclaimed the Colonel, aghast. "I—I—the fact is that Mr. Strahan and I are not the best of friends, and I wouldn't for the world have my name mentioned in the matter. Indeed, I don't see why you need speak to Marietta either. In these cases action is always preferable to words, don't you think so?"

But Lionel, unfortunately, did not think so. "Oh, I am not going to scold her," he answered, laughing; "I shall only, as I say, give her a hint."

So the Colonel left Arlington-street, a prey to harassing doubts as to whether, after all, he would not have done better to keep his own counsel.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN AN OPERA-BOX.

MARIETTA'S forgetfulness of her luncheon engagement had not been caused, as her father rather absurdly conjectured, by some surreptitious appointment with Strahan, but by a piteous little summons to Chesham-place from Betty, who wrote:

"I wish, if you have not anything particular to do, you would come and help me to cheer up granny. She is in the deepest dejection, and I have fallen into such depths of disgrace that they can only be described by word of mouth. When I tell you that we are upon the point of flying into the country to hide our shame, you will guess, perhaps, what a good use I have been making of my time since I saw you last!"

If Marietta's powers of divination were not quite equal to the demand made upon them, her curiosity, at all events, was sufficiently excited to impel her to order the carriage forthwith, and within half-an-hour she had been placed in possession of the distressing facts. It was generous of her, no doubt, to say that she considered herself in a great measure to blame for what had happened, since all this might have been averted if she had not refused the request made to her twenty-four hours before; but she could very well afford to be generous, now that the somewhat bumptious Betty was at her mercy, and she refrained from trampling upon the fallen. In the way of consolation there was not a great deal to be said; but she extended her fullest sympathy to the two ladies, and willingly promised that she would do what she could to make their peace with Lionel, whose unwonted sternness appeared to have frightened them out of their wits. Probably, indeed, she had been sent for in the hope that that

promise might be obtainable from her; for it is the privilege of easy-going men to become, on occasion, a source of terror to their womankind.

Thus, after having spent several hours in Chesham-place, Marietta returned home, glowing with conscious benevolence and prepared to discharge in no grudging spirit the mission with which she had been intrusted. She did not expect to see her husband before dinner time; so that it was a surprise to her to find him seated in her boudoir—a room which he very seldom entered—and to be informed that he had been waiting some little time for her. The fact was that, by dint of sitting with his hands before him and meditating over Colonel Vigne's remarks, he had managed to get himself into one of those worried conditions of mind in which nothing seems too preposterous to be quite impossible, and he was now really eager for the anticipated assurance on his wife's part that she was guiltless of having encouraged anybody's advances. Naturally, however, she ascribed his grave looks to another origin, and she hastened to say:

"You must forgive poor Betty, Lionel. I have just left her, and I can answer for her being really repentant. After such a lesson as she has had, she is not likely to offend in the same way again. Besides, isn't it punishment enough for her to be packed off home, like this, at a moment's notice?"

"Oh, you have been with them and heard all about it, then?" said Lionel. "I am sorry if Betty thinks I have been too hard upon her: I was under the impression that I had been studiously moderate in my observations. Unfortunately, it isn't my forgiveness—to which I am sure she is very welcome—that can put matters straight. Why is it, I wonder, that women can never distinguish between causes and effects!"

He spoke irritably, and continued to do so during the brief discussion which followed. "My dear Marietta," he said at length, "it is kind of you to take Betty's part, and I am as convinced as you are that she did not

realise what she was about when she made this amazing blunder. What she fails to understand, and what you also apparently fail to understand, is that intentions don't count. If I break the law, I must suffer for it, however ignorant or well-meaning I may have been."

"At that rate," remarked Marietta, "you would not mind what your sister did, so long as appearances were kept up."

"Come, Marietta, that wasn't what I said. All the same, appearances *are* important, and nobody can afford to disregard them."

He took advantage of the opportunity which she had given him to say what he had to say, and as quickly as possible he performed a task which he suddenly found to be a good deal more distasteful than he had anticipated. It was not, after all, exactly pleasant to accuse his wife of being too intimate with another man; so, in his haste to get the thing over and have done with it, he omitted to mention that he himself did not suspect her even of imprudence.

The consequence was that she was startled and genuinely alarmed. She turned pale, the pupils of her eyes became dilated, and for a moment she looked as like a guilty woman as she could very well look. But this was only for a moment. She instantly perceived that Lionel knew nothing—that it was, indeed, quite impossible for him to know anything—and she broke into a laugh so natural that his nascent fears, which were but the swift reflection of hers, were dissipated there and then.

"Mr. Strahan, of all people!" she exclaimed. "Well, certainly I have seen a good deal of him lately and I like him better than I did; but I should have thought that if there was a man in London whom I might safely receive, it was he. Everybody knows that he is a friend of yours, and I daresay a good many people know that he wasn't at first a particular friend of mine. Who can have been so ingenious as to suggest to you that he was compromising me?"

Lionel did not feel justified in betraying his informant. He was fain to reply, vaguely and a little shamefacedly, that he believed the frequency of Strahan's visits had been noticed, but that the matter was really not one of any consequence as yet. "All you have to do is to be 'not at home' to him when he calls; he isn't a fool, and he will grasp the meaning of that."

"Most likely he will," agreed Marietta, still laughing; "but do you really wish him to grasp the meaning of it? Would you like him to know that you pay him the compliment of being jealous of him?"

Generally it is foolish to display jealousy, and sometimes it is almost wise; but under no circumstances can it be very dignified to do so. Lionel rather hastily disclaimed any such sentiment.

"As far as I am concerned, Strahan is welcome to be here all day, and every day," he declared; "the only thing is that one can't afford to disregard the chatter of outsiders."

It would not have been easy to express himself more unfortunately. Marietta smiled and thanked him for having put her upon her guard; but inwardly she was nearly as much piqued as if she had adored this unimpassioned husband of hers. Since immunity from inconvenient chatter was all that he cared about, she would endeavour to spare him that inconvenience, she thought; more than that he had not asked for, and more he should not obtain. In her somewhat perverted view, his words conveyed a permission to do anything she liked, provided that she kept within the bounds of conventional decorum.

She was still under the influence of that impression when she betook herself to the opera some hours later, unaccompanied by Lionel, who had an engagement elsewhere. She had even, by a superfluity of conscientiousness, mentioned that Strahan would most likely be present at the performance, and might be expected to find his way to her box, to which her husband had replied:—

"Oh, well, that really can't be helped. I don't want

you to be rude to the poor fellow, much less to cut him. I hope you quite understand that it isn't in his power to give me one moment of personal uneasiness."

Consequently, when Lady Middlewood reached the scene of her first introduction to London society, she was in no temper to put a curb either upon her thoughts or her actions. She was reminded of that now distant occasion when she advanced to the front of the box and looked down upon the crowded rows of stalls beneath her. Since then she had indeed *fait du chemin!* At that time—or so, at any rate, she assured herself—she had been a very simple Italian girl, in love with the handsome young Englishman, who had been so proud to introduce her to his aristocratic relations, excited almost to the point of tears by the music and by the skill of the *prima donna*, whom she had innocently envied, and susceptible of being moulded into the best and most affectionate of wives. Now, through no fault of her own that she knew of, she was a totally different person. She herself had become a representative of this insular aristocracy. Some of her ambitions had been fulfilled, and had left her cold; others had ceased to attract her; she had realised, in short, that no fulfilled ambitions have power to satisfy the soul, save possibly one. To love and to be loved—is not that, when all is said, the one and only thing that can atone for the many disappointments of earthly existence? That Marietta Middlewood did not differ in any appreciable degree from Marietta Vigne, that she was only dissatisfied with her extremely fortunate lot because it was her nature to be always dissatisfied, and that love in her case was likely to prove quite as fleeting an emotion as any other, may have been facts; but for the moment she was happy in her inability to recognise them as such. She was happy, that is to say, in what it suited her to consider her unhappiness—which, to be sure, is no very uncommon experience.

The programme that evening was a broken one, being made up of selections from the works of two

modern Italian composers, whose somewhat sensuous melodies were strangely wedded to an orchestration of perceptibly Teutonic origin. The music was of a nature to accord with Marietta's not over-sincere mood, and at moments she willingly allowed her mental balance to be disturbed by it. There are so many things which one does not mean to do, yet which it is a luxury to contemplate one's self as doing, and she liked to fancy that she had it in her to sacrifice her wealth, her coronet, and her reputation for the sake of the man who had won her love.

She had caught sight of him in the stalls soon after her entrance; she had responded to his bow by a slight nod; immediately upon the fall of the curtain he presented himself in her box; and then, on a sudden, it was borne in upon her that, whatever sacrifices she might be prepared to make, few were to be expected from Roland Strahan.

"All alone?" were his first words. "I thought Lady Gosport was to be with you."

"Do you feel uncomfortable with out her protection?" asked Marietta. "If so, nothing hinders you from beating a retreat."

She had withdrawn from the front of the box, and the chair into which Strahan dropped close to her elbow was barely visible from any quarter of the house.

"I wonder why you say these things!" he murmured. "You know they aren't true."

"I suppose," she replied, "I say them partly because I know how true they are, and partly because you provoke me to it. Is it not enough that I am to be gravely cautioned by other people against your dangerous fascinations? Must you yourself be for ever reminding me that, however fascinating you may be, you wouldn't for the world be dangerous?"

He took no notice of this ironical query; but it was with evident displeasure and anxiety that he asked:—

"Who has been cautioning you? Has your father been saying anything?"

"No; only my husband. There! now you are really alarmed. I thought you would be. But take comfort; Lionel is not in the least jealous. He thinks that, as your attentions have been remarked upon, I had better be out for the future when you honour me with a visit, that's all. I mention this because your time is of so much value, and because I should be sorry for you to waste any of it upon fruitless calls in Arlington-street."

"You mean to obey orders then!"

"I haven't received any. I have been favoured with advice—which I daresay it would be wise on my part to take. Don't you think I should be wise to take it?"

"I wish I knew!" was his reply. "I wish I were as wise as you pretend to think me, and I wish—well, I wish, anyhow, that you were foolish enough to regret dismissing me!"

"Oh, I am foolish enough for that," she returned, with a slight laugh.

She was, perhaps, foolish enough for anything. He almost believed that she was. And yet—he was no nearer than he had been at the outset to any certainty as to the form which her folly might be expected to take. Feminine folly sometimes assumes such terribly inconvenient forms! In any case he was weary of this eternal fencing, and resolved to have an end of it.

"Lady Middlewood," said he, leaning forward, so that the words were almost whispered into her ear, "it is for you and nobody else to decide whether I shall be dismissed or not. Only one thing is certain—we must either be a good deal more or a good deal less to one another in future than we have been up to now."

She drew back with a startled, affrighted air which was not altogether assumed to suit the occasion. "What do you mean?" she asked. "I only suggested that you should not call quite so often while we are in London. Why should that make any difference?"

He replied calmly, "Because I can't and won't be treated in that way any longer. Because I love you; because you know quite well that I love you; and be-

cause"—he hesitated for one second before adding, "because I believe that you love me, Marietta!"

His audacity might have won a complete victory for him had he chosen a less public spot in which to resort to direct methods of attack: as it was, Marietta could allege a sufficient reason for the agitation which she was unable to control or disguise.

"Hush!" she whispered, pointing to the thin partition which separated them from the adjoining box; "you will be heard, and I shall be ruined! I have never given you the smallest right to insult me as you have done; but what eavesdropper would believe that?"

Strahan smiled. "There aren't any eavesdroppers," he answered composedly. "The next box is empty, and if it were full, we might shout at the top of our voices before we should be audible through that uproar."

For the orchestra had now resumed work with a crushing overture which certainly had volume enough to drown all other sounds; so that that pretext for closing his mouth could scarcely be maintained.

"You call it an uproar!" exclaimed Marietta, laughing nervously. "What a barbarian you are! If you can't appreciate the magnificence of it, I can; so please go back to your stall at once and leave me to listen to it."

"I will go," he answered, "if you tell me to go and never return to you again. Then I shall understand that I have really insulted you, and that I have been a madman to suppose that you could ever care for me as I do for you. Is that what you wish me to understand?"

She tried to say that it was; she would undoubtedly have said so, but for a horrible conviction that he would take her at her word, if she did. Even at that supreme moment—the moment which she had long foreseen, and had always in her heart been determined to bring about—she did not feel sure of him. She suspected that he would be speedily consoled, and that release and relief would be to him synonymous terms. And

while she yet hesitated he broke forth into a flood of impassioned language which astounded her, coming from the lips of one who knew so well how to hold himself in check. It was impossible to doubt that he was in earnest, impossible to tell him the lie which he dared her to tell, impossible also to throw away what she was both proud and ashamed of having secured. What remained possible was to gain time, and this concession he was the more willing to make because he was well aware of what such a plea must needs imply.

"To-morrow—no, not to-morrow, but the next day—I shall be at home at five o'clock," she said, rather breathlessly. "I ought not to see you—it is wrong, I know; but there are some things which I should like to say—which may help to explain, perhaps—but you must see that I can't say anything here! Now go away, please."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE BETTER PART OF VALOUR.

It was no very exultant woman who was driven away from Covent Garden in Lady Middlewood's luxurious equipage. She had been escorted down the staircase by an assiduous gentleman of her acquaintance, who, seeing that she was alone, had offered to find her footman for her; during her passage through the crowd she had several times heard her name mentioned in accents of admiration and envy by the bystanders (a species of homage to which she was never wholly insensible), and she could look back upon what she was fairly entitled to call a complete victory. But she did not call it by that name, nor were her feelings in any way akin to those of a conquering commander. She had, it was true, conquered Strahan in one sense; but had

he not conquered her in another, and perhaps a more real one? He had declared his conviction that she loved him, and he had not been contradicted—had scarcely even been so much as rebuked. Of course he could be in no doubt as to the outcome of the appointment which she had made with him.

But her own doubts were grave, as well as numerous. It is all very well to dream of an act of impetuous and romantic folly; it is quite another thing to be brought face to face with it and with its inevitable consequences. Granting (which is, indeed, an enormous concession to make) that the emotion which we call love may be of lifelong duration, and that mutual love between two human beings may make up to them for all imaginable privations, was it a fact that she loved Roland Strahan in that way? Was it a fact that, for the sake of keeping him always with her, she would be willing to throw away literally everything that she possessed—fortune, position, domestic joys, self-respect, and the respect of her neighbours? Was it even a fact that, by making this mad sacrifice, she would be able to keep him always by her side? She really did not know. There were moments when she loved the man, and there were other moments when she felt as if she did not wish ever to see him again. He was an avowed egoist, and at the bottom of her heart there lurked a constant misgiving that, when put to the test, he might prove himself a traitor.

The circumstance of her self-communings having taken that shape will doubtless lead the perspicacious reader to two conclusions: in the first place, that if she had been really in love, she would not have questioned her lover's sincerity or fidelity, and in the second, that she was more of a goose than of a prospective sinner. That the admission of an illicit affection should necessarily entail in Marietta's mind the abandonment of all that she contemplated abandoning ought surely to secure for her the amused pardon of any woman of the world. She was, however, serious enough about it. She

pictured herself eloping to Australia—nothing less than that—with the future premier of a colony destined to become great, and being, perhaps, eventually received and acknowledged as the legitimate wife of so brilliant a personage. She must either make up her mind to that she supposed, or else take leave of Roland Strahan for ever; and the truth was that neither alternative pleased her. She had played her cards badly; she had allowed her hand to be forced; she had not meant to be driven so soon, if at all, into such a corner. And since it is but natural, in a situation of that kind, to be incensed against somebody, she divided her anger in about equal portions between her husband and her admirer. The former, by his almost insulting permission to her to do what she pleased, had merited the worst that might befall him; the latter, by taking advantage of her in an unguarded and unprotected moment, had displayed a lack of generosity for which she longed to make him smart.

On her return home, she encountered Lionel, who always sat up late, and who was in the act of carrying a Blue Book from the library into his study. He hoped she had enjoyed herself, wished that he had had time to go to the opera with her, remarked that it was a horrid grind to have to get up the whole history of the education question, made no inquiries as to whom she had seen, and bade her good-night.

"So that is all *you* care!" she thought to herself as she mounted the broad staircase.

Upon the landing she stood irresolutely for a moment, and then, contrary to her habit, made her way to the nursery, where Bob was lying sound asleep, with his thumb in his mouth. That spectacle, which she contemplated in silence for a few minutes, to the manifest displeasure of the nurse, who did not like to be intruded upon without previous notice, afforded her the excuse which had probably been her motive in seeking it for some subsequent shedding of tears. Ultimately, she went to bed, and had what she considered a very bad

night. That is to say that it was very nearly an hour before profound slumber descended upon her and set her free from her numerous cares and dubitations.

Nobody ever wakes up in precisely the same mental condition as that in which he has fallen asleep, and Marietta, on opening her eyes and recalling the events of the previous evening, told herself that some of her conclusions had been a little too hasty. Things, after all, had not yet reached a climax, nor was she committed to any surrender. She had still a respite of thirty hours or so before her, and, with a little forethought, it should not exceed the range of her capacity to reply neither in the negative nor in the affirmative to the questions with which she was threatened.

In the breakfast-room, which Lionel had already quitted, she found her father, who apologised for intruding upon her at such an hour, alleging by way of excuse that the oppressive heat of the weather rendered early rising a necessity to him.

"London," he declared, "is the hottest and stuffiest city in Europe. It is a marvel to me that people who have big, cool, country houses, with shady parks and gardens, should deliberately choose to waste the best part of the summer in such an atmosphere."

The meaning of this was that the anxious Colonel had found himself unable to wait until the afternoon to ascertain the effect upon his daughter of her husband's proposed "hint," and also that he still clung to the rather forlorn hope of inducing her to turn her back upon Arlington-street and the waning season. His curiosity upon the first point was not gratified; but, to his surprise not less than to his delight, Marietta showed some inclination to share his views with regard to the second.

"You do look hot and tired and worried!" she said compassionately. "Now that you mention it, I believe I am hot and tired too. Would you come with us to Middlewood, I wonder, if we made up our minds all of a sudden to give our friends here the slip?"

It was all of a sudden that this simple method of evading a dilemma had suggested itself to her, and something associated with the idea caused her to laugh softly. Colonel Vigne joined in her merriment out of sheer light-heartedness and relief, though he did not know or guess what the joke was.

"My dear child," he replied, "there is nothing in the world that I should enjoy so much; provided that Lionel——"

"Oh, *he* won't leave London," interrupted Marietta; "you need not be in the least afraid of being in his way. When I said 'us,' I alluded to Bob and myself. Bob requires fresh air; so do you and so do I. With three such good reasons for decamping, we shall be justified, I think, in leaving Lionel to look after himself for a few weeks."

"Well," said her father, "if you are sure that he will consent to your leaving him, and that he will not be able to get away from London yet himself, I shall, of course, be only too glad to take charge of you during his absence."

"I am not quite sure about his being unable to leave London," answered Marietta; "but I haven't the slightest doubt about his being unwilling, and I don't think he is at all likely to object to my departure. However, nothing is easier than to find out; for I believe he is still somewhere on the premises."

She rang the bell, and despatched a message to his lordship, who presently appeared in response thereto.

"Oh, by all means," said he, as soon as his wife's wishes had been made known to him. "I quite agree with you both that it is a sin to be in London at this time of year, and I would be off myself if I could. Unfortunately, I have a good bit of committee-work on hand, which I can hardly abandon; but I shall take the first opportunity of getting out of this. When do you think of starting?"

"To-morrow morning," answered Marietta, promptly. "That can be managed, can't it?"

Lionel raised his eyebrows. "Well, it's rather short notice; but I suppose, if I telegraph at once, rooms and a certain amount of rough food can be got ready for you. Are you in such a tremendous hurry?"

Marietta gave him to understand that she was, and that she would greatly prefer a little possible discomfort to delay; so he shrugged his shoulders and said, with his usual good humour, "Very well; I'll go and give instructions."

When the door had closed behind him, the Colonel improved the occasion by remarking, "You ought to thank heaven for having given you such a good husband, my dear."

"For having given me a husband who can part with me so cheerfully?" she asked, laughing.

But she herself was cheerful, and any grudge that she may have felt entitled to cherish against the obliging Lionel, did not interfere with her spirits during the remainder of the day. It was with an almost mischievous glee that she imagined Strahan marching forth unsuspectingly to keep his tryst, and drew a mental picture of his chapfallen countenance when he should be informed that the bird had flown. That little slap in the face he had at least earned for himself! And she thought she understood the man well enough to feel sure that he would not accept the rebuff as final—which, indeed, it was not meant to be. Or did she, perhaps, mean it to be so taken? Did she wish to retain him as a friend, but not as a lover? Was her joyousness due to relief at deliverance from a great peril, and to self-approval at her obedience to the voice of conscience?

It was precisely because she could not answer any of these questions, because they were really very interesting questions, and because nothing now compelled her to return an immediate reply to them, that she gladdened Colonel Vigne's heart, on the morrow, by her smiling loquacity, after they had taken their places in the railway carriage which was to bear them northwards.

"I scarcely recognise you, my dear," the old gen-

tleman could not help saying. "That is, I scarcely recognise the *grande dame* that you have become in these days. You remind me of the child who used to jump for joy when I took her out of the convent for a holiday once upon a time."

"Well, are we not going to have a holiday, you and I?" she returned.

And with an impulsive movement, prompted no doubt by the wistful look which came over the kind old face opposite her, she threw her arms round her father's neck and kissed him on both cheeks.

His satisfaction was unbounded; he was delighted to think that he had been entirely mistaken, and that painful reminiscences, for which his child was in no way responsible, had caused him to be stupid as well as unjust. Evidently Strahan could be nothing to her, since she was able to turn her back upon the man without compunction or regret. If only it were possible to believe that Strahan also had been misjudged, and that that terrible retaliatory weapon, which he, unluckily, possessed, would remain unused!

Strahan, it must be confessed, was not the man to allow any weapon to rust in his hand; and the Colonel, if he had known his antagonist better, might have been even more disquieted than he was. As matters stood, however, it was scarcely probable that one who desired to remain upon the best of terms with Lord Middlewood, as well as with her ladyship, would be tempted to adopt the means alluded to of wrecking their domestic happiness. Strahan, indeed, when the time came for him to keep the appointment which he had made, could not be said to have any immediate or definite designs upon the domestic happiness of his friends in Arlington-street. Two nights and a day had considerably cooled the genuine ardour which he had displayed at Covent Garden; to tell the truth, he dreaded the coming interview, and doubted his ability to emerge from it with flying colours. Having gone as far as he had gone, it would be manifestly impossible for him to draw

back, nor—if Marietta should prove reasonable—did he wish to do so. But he had a great fear that she would not be reasonable; that she would demand something which could not be granted; that she would insist upon a public scandal, a divorce—heaven only knew what! Now, Strahan had quite made up his mind that this must not be. "I simply cannot afford it!" he said to himself irritably, and not without a certain sense of shame. "It won't be the pleasantest job in the world to tell her so, though!"

Thus, the news that her ladyship had left for Derbyshire that morning, and was not expected to return to town, did not fall with the weight of a crushing blow upon her would-be visitor, who handed in his card and turned away from the door without inquiring the cause of so abrupt a departure. This, in truth, he had at once and accurately guessed, so that neither his pride nor his hopes suffered any serious diminution. Marietta's flight was as good as an avowal—and, in many respects, far better than a verbal one would have been. He could now take his time. He mentally compared himself to a weasel following up a rabbit. The unhappy rabbit has no chance, though when it starts upon its futile, terrified course, it may believe that escape is possible. The comparison was scarcely a pretty one. "But I am a very mild weasel, in pursuit of a rather wild rabbit," he mused smilingly. "I shall be guilty of no cruelties; perhaps—who knows?—I shall not even be guilty of any kindnesses. What can't be questioned is that she has given me a fine opportunity for honourable retreat, and that, if I had wisdom and strength of mind enough, I should jump at it."

But presently it occurred to him that he was perhaps taking rather too much for granted. How did he know that Marietta had departed of her own free will? How did he know that she had not been ordered off into retirement by a justly indignant husband? By her own confession, Lionel had warned her against him; and it would not be the least unlike her to have made

a more momentous and infinitely more foolish confession to Lionel himself on her return from the opera. That was not quite so pleasant! Strahan continued his walk with a strong sense upon him that he had better be prepared for danger ahead; and since cowardice was not one of his numerous failings, he was almost glad, on turning out of St. James's-street into Pall Mall, to find himself face to face with the man who had been his friend, and who might very likely have been converted into his enemy.

But there was no suggestion of enmity in Lionel's cheery greeting of "Hullo, Strahan! Where are you off to with that glum visage? Nothing wrong in the City, I hope?"

"Things aren't looking too bright in the City at present," Strahan replied; "but, so far as we are concerned, there isn't much to grumble at." He added, watching the other narrowly while he spoke, "I have just been calling at your house, Middlewood."

"Ah! then you have drawn the covert blank. My wife made tracks for home this morning, almost at a moment's notice. She is sick of this sweltering town —and so am I, goodness knows! However, it isn't quite such an easy matter for me as it is for her to cancel engagements, and I don't suppose I shall be a free man much before the second week in August. Come down to us for the twelfth, like a good fellow, and let me have the pleasure of seeing you shoot as straight as you did last year."

After this, a few words were exchanged relating to matters of business, and then the two men parted. One of them had actually forgotten an alleged peril to which he had never given any credence; the other, who was aware of having escaped a very real one, and who breathed more freely in consequence, could not suppress a slightly contemptuous grimace.

"Really," he said to himself, "when people go out of their way to invite treachery—for I suppose it must be called treachery—they have nobody but themselves

to blame if they are taken at their word. All the same, I don't think I will shoot over those Middlewood moors. Why, in the name of common-sense, should I ride at a yawning quarry with my eyes wide open?"

Well, of course there was only one reason for behaving in the manner thus figuratively described; but that reason, as the history of generation after generation of human beings testifies, is strong enough to account for any act of rashness or folly. It was strong enough to make Roland Strahan, one of the coolest and most far-sighted of men, wind up his meditations with an impatient oath.

"Oh, I shall go!" he muttered; "there's no doubt that I shall go! I am a fool for my pains, and I shall lay up trouble for myself which might have been avoided; but—I love her!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

STRAHAN THE INVINCIBLE.

"LET them come in their thousands!" cried Betty Mallet proudly; "they won't stare me out of countenance, I can promise you. What do I care if all London, or all the world, chooses to look askance at me? I have done nothing wrong, and most certainly I don't intend to run away from anybody."

This defiant challenge *urbi et orbi* was delivered early in the month of August at Middlewood, where Lady Maria and her granddaughter had been for some days staying as guests. It was called forth by the imminent assembling of a large house-party, and by a remark which Lady Maria had let fall during breakfast to the effect that, under all the circumstances, it would be as well for her and Betty to retire to Chelton. The

circumstances, it had to be confessed, were not over-propitious to any public appearance on the part of the latter. Her precipitate flight into the country had, unfortunately, done her no good; the story of that insane expedition of hers to Hampton Court had leaked out and had been freely discussed; severe strictures had been passed upon her, and these had been duly reported to her grandmother by some of those kind friends who are always ready to undertake the discharge of a painful duty. The consequence was that poor old Lady Maria had lost courage, and had jumped to the conclusion that she had a bale of hopelessly damaged goods upon her hands. In plain words, she had given up dreaming of splendid alliances, was prepared to listen to proposals from any decent man to whom wealth and good blood constituted attractions, and was of opinion that, pending the advent of some such decent man, Betty would do well to keep as much as possible out of sight.

But it scarcely needs to be said that this was by no means the view of Miss Betty, who did not regard herself in the light of a blemished filly at an auction, and upon whom the bare suggestion of avoiding possible discourtesies by ignominious retreat acted as a powerful tonic. She was now sitting under a huge umbrella-tent on the lawn with her sister-in-law, and she had just expressed her determination to await the attack of any number of foes—subject, of course, to the permission and invitation of her brother and her hostess.

"I don't think that there is any reason at all for you to run away," Marietta said, "and I am sure none of these people will dare to be impertinent to you—except, perhaps, Mr. St. Quintin, whose impertinence knows no bounds, and who is really answerable for all the fuss that has been made."

"Well, I don't know so much about that," observed Betty. "He couldn't help seeing what he saw, and I believe he has been as good as his word and held his

tongue ever since. It doesn't seem to have been Mr. St. Quintin who has given me away."

"He could perfectly well have helped seeing anybody or anything," Marietta declared. "All he had to do was to look the other way, and it seems to me that, if he had been a gentleman, that is exactly what he would have done. However, if you don't mind being spied upon, it is not for me to object to amateur detectives. I think Lionel might have allowed me to see the list of his guests before he gave verbal invitations; but I dare say he wouldn't, in any case, have let me strike out Mr. St. Quintin's name. I believe he loves that insufferable young man as much as I abhor him."

Betty at once took up the cudgels on Mr. St. Quintin's behalf. "Insufferable he may be," she returned. "I don't say that he isn't, and indeed I myself have sometimes found him so. But it is absurd to assert that he isn't a gentleman and to call him a spy. It is only bare justice to acknowledge that he is a gentleman in all his dealings; though he doesn't think much of me—and small blame to him!"

All things considered, this was a generous testimony to character on Betty's part; but perhaps it was only elicited by a sentiment akin to that which forbids the beating of one's own dog by any instrument save one's own stick, held in one's own hand. Miss Mallet had a rod in pickle for Mr. St. Quintin which, by her way of thinking, he deserved to taste, and when, a few days after this, he reached Middlewood, together with numerous other visitors, she greeted her former friend after a fashion so frigid that he instinctively drew back from her vicinity. For that matter, he had expected nothing else. It was but natural that she should hate the sight of him, and when, because he loved the sight of her, he had accepted Lionel's invitation, he had known very well what lay before him.

Lionel himself had only reached Middlewood twenty-four hours in advance of his guests, and to him also a somewhat chilling reception had been accorded by one

of the inmates of the house. By the other three—that is to say, by Lady Maria, Betty and Colonel Vigne—he had been welcomed warmly enough; but his wife was not particularly glad, and did not affect to be particularly glad, to see him. Why, indeed, should she be, considering that his anxiety to see her had yielded to an apparently stronger anxiety to see his horses run in Sussex, and that he was attracted to Derbyshire even now by nothing but a sense of what he owed to the grouse and his friends?

He did not, however, show any sign of feeling aggrieved, nor did he even appear to remember that his wife's conduct, prior to her departure from London, had been such as to call for a mild admonition from him. He almost took her breath away, shortly after his arrival, by announcing, in a cool, matter-of-course way, that Strahan would be with them soon.

"Not until next week, I am afraid; he is up to the eyes in work which he can't leave. But he tells me that he hopes presently to be able to make arrangements for a longish holiday."

"I wonder," Marietta could not help saying, "that you don't order the dinner and arrange the flowers and write out the menu-cards. Of course you are master here, and you can ask anybody you like to stay with you; but surely it is usual for invitations to come nominally from the so-called mistress of the house."

"Not when it is a case of men and guns, I think," answered Lionel. "Still I am very sorry if I have asked anybody whom you would rather have left out. Do you dislike any of these fellows? Strahan I am sure you won't mind."

Marietta laughed a little. "Oh, *I* mind nobody and nothing," she replied; "I thought it was you who minded Mr. Strahan. At all events, you requested me to discourage his visits to Arlington-street."

"That was a totally different matter," Lionel declared; "one may be very glad to have a man down to stay in the country, as one of a crowd, and yet not

wish him to turn up every afternoon in London. Besides, if there had not seemed to be some danger of silly gossip, I should not have had the slightest objection to Strahan's calling upon you in London as often as he chose. I thought I had said so at the time."

"You made that perfectly clear at the time, thanks," answered Marietta, drily. "I don't quite understand why there should have been more danger of gossip then than now, or in Arlington-street than here; but no doubt you know best."

Lady Maria was very glad to hear that Mr. Strahan (whose judicious counsels had enabled her to enjoy a successful little gamble) was expected. The E. C. U., the poor-box at St. Winifred's and various funds and institutions equally laudable having profited after an indirect fashion through him, she was disposed to regard him as a benefactor to the church, in addition to his other merits, and she spoke of him in appreciative terms to St. Quintin, who responded by a dissentient grunt.

"Oh, you don't like him, I observe," said the old lady; "no doubt there will always be plenty of people to dislike a man who has got on so fast. But it isn't pretty of you to put on that air of being able to say a great deal if you choose."

She shook her head and her uplifted forefinger, adding that we ought all of us to be on our guard against envy and jealousy.

"Mr. St. Quintin is far above envy," remarked Betty, who chanced to be standing near; "he is too well aware of his own superiority to be envious of anybody. And of course there is no denying that he could say shocking things about some of us if he were not as merciful as he is great."

St. Quintin did not think he had deserved that, and he took an early opportunity of mentioning to Miss Mallet that he did not think he had deserved it. But Betty, who had already been enraged by the kindly patronage of several of her sister-in-law's lady guests, and who had been made to feel that, if an innocent,

she was at least a foolish and deeply compromised young woman, was inexorable.

"I should have thought," said she, "that you would have accepted my modest, but sincere, compliments in a more grateful spirit. I am sure you can't be envious of Mr. Strahan, though I believe he *is* a rather better man than you are with a gun or on a horse. Morally speaking, you can look down from a sublime height upon him and all the rest of us, and we humbly acknowledge it. What more would you have?"

"Oh, nothing that I am at all likely to get, thank you," replied the meek St. Quintin. "I can't say that I envy Strahan, in the sense of wishing to change places with him; but I do rather envy him his luck, which is a good deal better than mine."

Without being envious, one may easily groan under the pangs of jealousy, and St. Quintin was no more exempt from the latter infirmity than any other man who is hopelessly in love. Consequently, Betty made his blood boil—it may even have been her cruel intention so to do—by the marked and persistent manner in which she attached herself to Mr. Strahan throughout the evening which followed his arrival at Middlewood. No man with eyes in his head—least of all a man with jealous eyes in his head—could help seeing that Strahan's was a fascinating sort of personality, nor, in view of Lady Maria's diminished ambitions, could it be looked upon as by any means certain that advances on his part would be spurned by the family. And that a very little encouragement would induce the fellow to make such advances who could doubt? It was obvious that so splendid a match would be the making of him.

These apprehensions might have been allayed—though others might have been substituted for them—if the uneasy St. Quintin had overheard a short colloquy which took place upon the staircase shortly before midnight, while he was getting into his smoking clothes. Strahan, who had changed his dress-coat for a shabby old shooting-jacket (velvet and plush had no charms

for him), was descending the stairs when he met his hostess, with whom he had not as yet exchanged half-a-dozen words. He drew aside to let her pass, glancing up quickly at the long corridor above him; but Marietta, while taking note of that tacit hint, stood still and surveyed him with an ironical smile.

"Don't be alarmed," said she; "they have all gone down, except Mr. St. Quintin, and he walks so heavily that his approach can be foretold from any distance. If it isn't too impertinent, may I take this opportunity of asking why you have come here?"

"Surely," he replied, "that question answers itself! Would it not be rather more to the purpose if I were to ask why you left London after promising to receive me on the very day that you started?"

"Most people," returned Marietta, "would tell you that that also is a question which answers itself."

"Not a doubt of it? But would most people be right? That, as, of course, you must be aware, is what I have come to Derbyshire, without any invitation from you, to discover."

Marietta was rather glad to hear that. It had occurred to her as being well within the limits of possibility that Mr. Strahan had come to Derbyshire for the sole and simple purpose of shooting grouse. But there was no manifestation of pleasure at all in the frowning gaze with which she confronted him.

"I cannot understand Lionel having asked you!" she observed after a moment.

"I suppose," answered Strahan coolly, "he saw no reason why he shouldn't. Perhaps there is no reason?"

"Except that I might have told him of your having insulted me the last time we met."

"That would have been a conclusive reason, I admit, but as you didn't tell him, and as you never meant to tell him——"

Strahan's methods with women were apt to be brutal. He did not know a great deal about them; but his experience had been that brutality often succeeds where

respectful sighs are of no avail, and the fact that Lady Middlewood had not made the confession alluded to was far more significant to him than the angry gesture with which she cut him short.

"You are insolent!" she exclaimed; "you have no right to say that I never meant to tell my husband! If you ever dare to speak to me again as you did that night at the opera, I may be obliged to tell him."

Strahan took up this challenge without an instant's hesitation. It is true that, in repeating his offence, he adopted a more pleading and less authoritative tone than he had hitherto employed; but, nothing could have been more unequivocal than his avowal of love, nor did he offer any excuses for himself. These things, he said, don't happen to us because we invite them or wish for them; they happen because they are inevitable. And he spoke with so much warmth and such evident sincerity that she could not find it in her heart to interrupt him. Did she love the man? Was she indignant with his audacity or amused by his candour in lamenting an attachment which might easily prove disastrous to his prospects? Should she pardon or rebuke him? All these questions suggested themselves to her while he talked; but there was one which she did not so much as entertain for a moment. It was, indeed, quite certain that happen what might, she would not denounce him to Lionel.

And so, when at length he caught her hand and pressed it to his lips, the dismissal which was the immediate result of that impertinence did not alarm him. Never a word had he obtained in answer to his entreaties; but he laughed a little under his breath, all the same, as he made his way towards the smoking-room. He knew as much as he wanted to know: more than that, he had now every reason to hope that Marietta would prove what he mentally called "tractable."

She proved so far tractable that she accosted him the next morning with complete amiability; but she took very good care, during that and several ensuing

days to allow him no second chance of driving her into a corner. Nor was he in any great hurry. He was out on the moors, enjoying and distinguishing himself, from morning to night; he was not unwilling to grant and receive a respite; he foresaw, too, that the fuller mutual understanding which was inevitable might entail his departure from a house where he was having very good fun.

His presence, meanwhile, was a source of constant and deep disquietude to one of his fellow-guests. The vigilant Colonel, who was not equal to joining the shooting-parties, seldom let his daughter out of his sight, and was thus able to assure himself that there were at least no clandestine meetings between her and Strahan; but during the evenings he did (being on the look-out for such things) detect occasional swift glances which struck him as only too significant, and he could only marvel at the density of his son-in-law, who seemed determined to detect nothing at all.

One afternoon, when Marietta, with three other ladies, had driven out towards the moors to meet the shooters on their return, the Colonel, for whom there had been no room in the carriage, started off on foot in pursuit. It was very hot, and he was no longer much of a pedestrian; but he had a premonition of coming danger which urged him onwards and upwards, and at the end of three or four weary miles this was verified by the spectacle of Strahan, with his gun under his arm, sauntering slowly along beside Lady Middlewood. The Colonel instinctively stepped aside, as the couple drew near, availing himself of the cover afforded by a large plantation, and thus he was enabled to overhear what Marietta was saying.

"I suppose it can't be helped. I dare say it is no fault of yours, and I am sure it is none of mine," were her alarming words.

Then she caught sight of her father and started visibly, the colour rushing into her cheeks. But Strahan neither started nor blushed. His keen eyes flitted

quickly from his companion to the over-heated old gentleman who blocked the pathway, and he smiled a little, as at some diverting thought.

"You don't look as if you were in the very best of training, Colonel Vigne," he remarked affably. "You ought to have been out with us this morning, when the sun was higher; you would have reduced your weight by three or four pounds at a single stroke."

The Colonel's choking rejoinder was unintelligible. Presently other sportsmen, with attendant ladies, hove in sight: Marietta hurriedly joined them; and thus it came to pass that Colonel Vigne was soon left in the background with Strahan, who had paused to lace up his boot.

"I am glad to have this opportunity of a word with you, sir," began the old gentleman hoarsely.

"I thought you would be," returned the other, with much composure; "that's why my bootlace got adrift, you know. You haven't treated me in such a way as to make me particularly solicitous for your welfare; still, in common humanity, I couldn't let you have an apoplectic fit, when getting your breath out was sure to relieve you. Please, get it out; don't mind me."

The poor Colonel forgot himself so far as to shake his fist close under Strahan's nose. "You insolent puppy!" he gasped. "I shall not waste my breath, at all events, in saying what I was going to say to you; but one thing I should like to know—are you man enough to resent an insult? If so, I am at your orders when you please."

Strahan laughed. "That is nonsense," he replied tranquilly. "It would be out of the question for me to fight you, even if I wanted to do so—which, I am sure, is far from being the case; but——"

"Why out of the question?" demanded the irate Colonel.

"Oh, for various good reasons. But, as you know, there are other methods of carrying on warfare than by fire and sword, and I hope you will not drive me to

have recourse to them. You seem to have forgotten our little talk in London and the truce which came of it."

"I agreed to no truce," the Colonel declared; "and if I had, a truce is a temporary arrangement. Of course you have it in your power to do me a great injury; but I may be ready to incur that and avoid a greater one. Since you have no stomach for fighting, will you at least undertake upon your oath——"

"Oh, dear, no!" interrupted Strahan; "I must absolutely decline to undertake anything upon my oath. Except indeed to tell Middlewood all that I know about your history if you carry out the threat which I can see is upon the tip of your tongue. You may remember my warning you in London that you would have to allow me a free hand; I can only repeat what I said then. It is for you to decide whether you will or will not make a statement which nobody will believe, with the certainty of being met by a counter-statement, the truth of which can be easily proved."

The Colonel sat down stiffly upon the bank by the wayside and waved his hand. "Go on, sir," said he, "I can't walk with you. You shall have my answer as soon as I have made up my mind what to do; but rest assured of this: you shall not frighten me into doing nothing at all."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FOE IN NEED.

Colonel Vigne sat on the grassy bank where he had been left, with his elbows upon his knees and his chin supported by his folded hands. He said to himself that this is a poor sort of world, that a plain man, who would fain do his duty, has not much chance in it

against the rascals who form the majority of its inhabitants, and that the ways of Providence—always supposing Providence to take more interest than is apparent in a planet so insignificant and so iniquitous—are past comprehension. It would be so simple and so manifestly just to allow each poor mortal a fair start! Equipped with a conscience and a will of moderate strength, who can say that most of us would not be in a position to resist the fiery darts of mankind's enemy? What reasonable explanation can there be of the enigma of heredity? Why are the sins of the fathers (and the mothers) to be visited upon their unoffending children? The Colonel scratched his ear and muttered that he was hanged if he knew. He added that this sort of thing was enough to make a man doubt the truth of everything that he had been taught.

But, as he was a sensible, practical old fellow, he soon recognised the utility of vexing his brains over problems which never have been and never can be solved, and turned his attention to the question of what, under existing circumstances, could be done. Well, of course he could speak to Lionel and take his chance of Strahan's threatened retaliation. He might even forestall Strahan by honestly confessing what he had hitherto shrunk from revealing. But there were several strong objections to that straightforward course. To begin with, he owed something to the memory of his dead wife; then, too, he could not bear the thought of affixing a stigma to his innocent daughter; finally, he felt a not unnatural reluctance to avow that he had withheld a statement which certainly ought to have been made before Marietta's marriage.

"It just comes to this," he concluded ruefully, "that I am absolutely helpless! Short of shooting the fellow, there's no getting rid of him—and he evidently don't mean to let me have a shot at him. Upon my word and honour, I've more than half a mind to put a bullet into my own head!"

The sound of an approaching footfall broke the

thread of these dismal meditations, and he glanced up with some impatience at the intruder, a small seedy-looking man in a threadbare coat, who presently came to a standstill in front of him and said, in hesitating, deprecating accents: "I beg your pardon, sir."

"What for?" asked the Colonel curtly.

"For taking the liberty of addressing you," replied the stranger, with disarming meekness. "But I had sat down to rest in the wood a short distance above you, and I saw—I could not help seeing—the—er—inter-view which took place just now between you and Mr. Strahan. And something of what you said—which was spoken rather loudly—came to my ears."

"The devil it did!" thought the Colonel. "Here's a nice complication!"

He knitted his brows and stared at the eavesdropper who had probably heard him own that Strahan had it in his power to do him a great injury. "Well, sir, what then?" he asked, in a stern tone of voice.

The man's red eyelids blinked rapidly and nervously. His nose also was red, and he had the unhealthy complexion of a confirmed tippler. The ragged beard and moustache which concealed the lower part of his face were streaked with gray hairs which had evidently arrived before they were due, and he wore that indescribable air of having been repeatedly kicked which lends pathos to the aspect of many a vagrant mongrel.

"Oh, nothing," he made haste to reply—"nothing at all, I assure you! I merely gathered from your manner and from your shaking your fist in his face that —that—in short that he is not a friend of yours."

The Colonel laughed. "One doesn't usually shake one's fist in the face of one's friend," he agreed. "No; Mr. Strahan is not a friend of mine; I make you welcome to that piece of information. Perhaps you are going to inform me in return that he isn't a friend of yours?"

"Sir," replied the stranger, with a good deal of tremulous earnestness, "I can only tell you, that if there

is a man on earth whom I should rejoice to see in hell, that man is Roland Strahan."

"I should think you might count upon meeting him there," observed the Colonel, who was not greatly fascinated with his interlocutor; "but the chances are that you will have to wait a good many years. You don't appear to me to have taken as much care of your health as he has of his."

"It is he," replied the other, spreading out his hands tragically, "he, and nobody else, who has made me what I am! Can you wonder that my heart warms to any enemy of his?" He added presently, as the old gentleman displayed no symptom of reciprocal warmth, "My name is Brydon."

"I am sorry to tell you," returned Colonel Vigne, "that that says nothing to me."

"Ah! I thought you might possibly have heard. But no doubt it has become an old and forgotten story, and I dare say Lord Middlewood, who always made much of Strahan, doesn't often care to allude to what took place during their last term at Oxford. A scapegoat was found—I was the scapegoat—and nobody can have expected that my turn would ever come. It has come now, though!" concluded the stranger, slapping his breast-pocket significantly and exultantly.

Upon this the Colonel pricked up his ears. "I know who you are now," said he; "you are the ex-undergraduate who was believed to have been the cause of that unfortunate girl's suicide and who disappeared, rather than give evidence at the inquest. Am I to understand that you can now prove your innocence?"

The man nodded. "More than that, sir; I can prove Strahan's guilt. I have in my pocket letters from him to Maggie Field which places the matter beyond a doubt. Even at the time I had suspicions of him—very strong suspicions."

"Then why the dickens did you run away, man?" the Colonel asked bluntly.

"Because I might have been guilty—several people,

I believe, might have been guilty—and because that devil frightened the life out of me. He pretended to advise me as a friend; he said there was evidence against me and none against anybody else, and that I had better be off, unless I wanted to be put upon my trial for manslaughter. I have heard since that such a charge couldn't have been made; but he assured me that it could, and he seemed to know all about it. So I believed him, and rushed upon my own ruin. I should tell you that I have no near relations and only a very small fortune of my own to live upon. My uncle, who is a clergyman and who meant me to take orders, paid my University expenses, but that scandal gave him an excuse for washing his hands of me which I don't suppose he was very sorry to have. Anyhow, when I thought it safe to write to him, his reply was that I had exhausted his benevolence and must take the consequences of my actions. That meant ruin—neither more nor less. What hope could there be for such a man as I am, without one single friend to lend him a helping hand, and scarcely enough money to keep him in—in——"

"In liquor?" suggested the Colonel.

He could not help despising this trembling, premature old creature, who certainly did not look like a man for whom, under any circumstances, there could have been very much hope. The unfortunate Brydon exhibited no resentment.

"Oh, I'm a drunkard," he confessed. "I don't deny it; there would be very little use in my denying it, I suppose. Besides, I don't care who knows what I am. There is only one thing in the world that I do care for now," he continued, in more resolute accents, "and that is to pay out the man who has driven me to drink and beggary."

"Ah!—and you think you can pay him out?"

"It's no question of thinking, sir; I *know* I can. These letters which I have in my pocket would be enough to damn him in any court of law. Of course

I know now that that talk about a trial for manslaughter was all nonsense and that he isn't open to any legal form of punishment; but I take it that he can be ruined, nevertheless. Once let him be dropped by his aristocratic friends, who would be obliged to drop him if the truth came out, and you may be sure that it won't be very long before he has to resign his secretaryship and all his ambitions with it. If you'll allow me, I'll sit down; for I am not in very good health, and it makes my head swim to talk while I am standing."

Seating himself upon the bank, he proceeded with his revelations, which were of an interesting character. He knew quite well, it appeared, who Colonel Vigne was, and he allowed it to be inferred that he also knew why Lady Middlewood's father would not be sorry to be provided with the means of crushing Strahan. Such means, he said, existed, and were obtainable upon easy terms.

"You must understand," he explained, "that I realised long ago how I had been fooled, and that I have been hungering and thirsting for revenge all this time. But what hope could I have? I had done for myself by absconding, and to prove that that villain ought to have absconded, instead of me, seemed the wildest of impossibilities. All I could do was to keep a constant eye upon him, trusting that he might end by committing some other infamy which I should be able to discover and expose. But one morning, what should I see in the papers but an advertisement, imploring W. B. to communicate at once with Bessie F., who was dying, and who wished to put him in the way of clearing his character of an unfounded charge. I could not doubt that this was a message to William Brydon from Bessie Field, Maggie's elder sister, and I reached Oxford just in time to see the poor girl before she died. What she told me was very much what I had expected to hear, except that her motive for having kept silence, and indeed perjured herself, at the inquest was rather an odd one. She was a great deal older than

Maggie—more than ten years, I believe—and not at all good-looking; so one would scarcely have conjectured that she would have fallen in love with Strahan. However, there is no accounting for the eccentricities of women or what they will lead to, and it seems that, in spite of all she knew and could have proved, she preferred letting an innocent man suffer to injuring a scoundrel who had never looked twice at her. It was only when she found herself at the point of death that she was seized with pangs of remorse and put that advertisement into the papers. Even then she begged me to be generous and not to use the letters which she felt bound to hand over to me in such a way as to blight Strahan's career. I said I would be as generous to him as he had been to me."

"The letters," said Colonel Vigne, "are conclusive, I presume?"

"Absolutely conclusive. The earlier ones contain a promise of marriage, in view of certain contingencies; the later ones ridicule such an idea, and remind her that she has no character to lose. That was true enough; she hadn't much character left at the time when he made her acquaintance. All the same, she was true to him, I believe, and it was undoubtedly his cruelty that drove her to commit suicide."

"It isn't a very pretty story," remarked the Colonel musingly; "still I should scarcely like to say that it was Strahan's duty to marry such a young woman as you describe."

"That's not the question. What I imagine that Strahan would give a good deal to keep dark is the fact that he deliberately got behind another man's back to screen himself, and that he has ruined that other man quite as effectually as he did poor Maggie Field."

"I suppose he would."

"Not a doubt of it! And, to be quite frank with you, sir, my intention was to intercept him this very afternoon and ask him how much he was prepared to give for the letters which I have in my pocket. As

you know, it was impossible to intercept him on this occasion, because he was not alone, and I am glad, upon the whole, that I was prevented from carrying out my original design. For, more reasons than one, I would rather sell the documents to you than to him."

"Sell them!" exclaimed the Colonel; "do you mean to say that you propose simply to levy blackmail upon the fellow? But then what becomes of your revenge—and your damaged reputation?"

Brydon smiled. "I assure you," he replied, "that I do not care one solitary curse for my reputation, which is irretrievably damaged. Didn't I tell you that I am a drunkard and that my sole remaining pleasure in life is to get drunk? Revenge, of course, would be a pleasure, and I was to a certain extent sure of that; for I don't suppose he would have enjoyed paying me a thousand pounds, which was the price I meant to ask. Added to which, he would always have remained in fear of my having kept back some further documentary evidence. But I see now that there is a much more satisfactory plan open to me. You will buy the letters, and you will use them to pulverise him. That way I shall get my revenge and my money into the bargain, you see."

"You are not a very estimable person, Mr. Brydon," remarked the Colonel drily.

"I don't pretend to me. Once upon a time I might have been as estimable as other people; but that time is gone and will never return—thanks to our good friend. Certainly I should like to plant a dagger in his back, if I could; I have been dogging his steps ever since he returned to England for no other purpose, and perhaps I might even have stabbed him with an actual dagger before now, if I had had the nerve. But I am not sure that I don't want almost as much to have a pocket full of sovereigns. Anyhow my luck seems to have turned at last; for I am in a fair way to get my heart's desire in both respects."

"H'm! well, I'm not so sure about that," said the

Colonel. "I'm sure, I can't afford to give you a thousand pounds, anyhow."

"In your case, my dear sir, I should be prepared to accept much lower terms. I regard your intervention in the light of a luxury, which one can't expect to get for nothing. Let us call it five hundred and say no more about it."

"I can make no offer until I know what I am buying," replied the prudent old warrior. "First of all, let me see these letters; then I shall be in a position to talk to you."

Mr. Brydon pointed out that, although this sounded only reasonable, it was really demanding a good deal.

"Am I to enable you to steal my thunder?" he aske. "Suppose, after satisfying yourself that proof of Strahan's guilt exists, you were to decline to pay for that proof? Your object, I imagine, is simply to get rid of the man, and that object might very well be obtained by telling him what you have discovered and threatening to tell others. Oh, I mean no offence," he added hastily, as the old gentleman grasped his stick; "all I want you to understand is that if I submit these papers to your inspection, I shall be giving some evidence of trust in your honour."

"Your trust shall not be betrayed, sir," the Colonel declared. "If those papers prove what you say they prove, I will pay you what I can afford for them as soon as I can get the money. That is to say, three hundred pounds in about a week's time. Very well, then—three hundred and fifty; but beyond that I can't go. Supposing that they don't give conclusive proof—well, in that case they wouldn't be worth three hundred and fifty of any man's money, would they? Is it a bargain?"

Not without some further haggling was it so pronounced, but the Colonel was firm, while his opponent was both weak and eager to place in other hands the task of attacking the redoubtable Strahan. He ended, therefore, by giving in, and Colonel Vigne, seated upon

the bank, had the pleasure of perusing through his *pince-nez* a series of missives which, if human justice were not the poor makeshift that it is, should have sufficed to hang their writer.

"These," he remarked, while he removed the glasses from his nose, "are the letters of a thorough-paced blackguard!"

"They are," Brydon agreed.

"A thorough-paced blackguard, sir!—I never read anything more brutal and heartless in my life. And with such letters in my possession, it will be odd if I can't send Mr. Strahan back to Australia in double-quick time."

"The thing to do," observed the other vindictively, "will be to expose and disgrace him publicly here. It won't matter whether he returns to Australia or what becomes of him afterwards."

"That's as may be; I don't bind myself to create a public scandal; I haven't made up my mind yet how I shall act. Meanwhile, time is of importance, and I should like to use these documents at once, if you will trust me with them. I will give you an I. O. U. for the money, and, as it is invested in consols, I presume that I shall be able to hand it over to you in hard cash within a week. Will that do?"

The point thus raised brought about another protracted debate, the outcome of which was a second success for the Colonel. Brydon, indeed, seemed to be physically incapable of holding out long against supposition, and all he finally stipulated for, while the Colonel was writing out a formal I. O. U. upon a leaf of his pocketbook, was the advance of a small sum on account.

"I rely implicitly upon your honour and punctuality, sir," said he. "I will meet you here, this day week, to receive the amount owing to me and to hear, I trust, that I have been in some degree avenged. In the meantime, I shall have to pay my score at the village alehouse, and I regret to say that I am almost penniless.

Consequently, any spare cash that you may have about you——"

The Colonel turned out his waistcoat pocket, which was found to contain a trifle over five pounds. A few minutes later he was marching back towards the great house, with the happy conviction that one who had threatened to bring ruin upon it was himself upon the verge of being ruined. Three hundred and fifty pounds is no such insignificant sum for a half-pay Colonel to lay out upon a handful of love-letters; but "Dear me!" said he to himself, "what does it matter? In a few years the money would have gone to Marietta, who will never miss it, and upon my word I don't know how it could have been employed more advantageously for her than it is going to be. Mr. Strahan, my friend, our truce has expired!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE COLONEL GIVES BATTLE.

STRAHAN, after parting with Colonel Vigne in the plantation, as related, stepped briskly forward to catch up his friends. He had no sort of fear of losing the friendship of these ladies and gentlemen through action on the part of his irate, but impotent enemy; he could even afford to laugh good-humouredly and compassionately at the recollection of the latter's valedictory words.

"So you can't be frightened into doing nothing, eh?" he muttered. "Well, you are a plucky old gentleman, and it's only fair to admit that you aren't very easily frightened. But you will do nothing, all the same, for the simple reason that there is nothing for you to do. The question which isn't a bit simple is what I am going to do, and I'll be hanged if I can

answer it! All I know is that that interrupted conversation will have to be resumed."

His conversation with Marietta had, in truth, been broken off at a point which rendered its resumption imperative and inevitable. If she had not actually confessed that she loved him, she had allowed him to speak as only an admitted lover could have spoken, and his passion (which was real and strong) had become so inflamed that it was all he could do to lend an ear to the whispered counsels of prudence. Prudence, at any rate, could no longer dissuade him from running risks. As for running away, with Lady Middlewood to bear him company, he really did not think that such extreme measures were likely to become obligatory upon him, and it would be time enough to oppose them when they were suggested—as very possibly they would be.

So, although he was unable immediately to secure his hostess's private attention, he found an opportunity of doing this after dinner, when he drew near to her and said, in a low voice, "I must see you alone. Give me a time and place."

She looked troubled and surveyed him with large startled eyes ("How can she be so foolish as to look like that in a room full of people!" he wondered, with momentary irritation); but she did not dispute his right to demand an appointment.

"I will walk out towards the moor soon after luncheon to-morrow," she answered hurriedly. "Perhaps you might give up shooting early in the day. But please don't think——"

"I think nothing," he returned, with a smile, "and I don't want to think anything. I want to *know*. Will you tell me what I want to know to-morrow afternoon?"

She nodded hastily and moved away, being uncomfortably conscious of her father's scrutiny. She would have been still more uncomfortable had she been aware that Colonel Vigne had not only taken note of the above brief interchange of words but had divined their im-

port. It was, indeed, tolerably evident to one whose suspicions were so fully aroused that Marietta and Strahan would have had either more or less to say to one another if they had not been arranging a future interview.

The Colonel, therefore, kept his eyes and ears open, and it did not surprise him to hear Strahan remark casually at breakfast the next morning, "I shall have to be satisfied with half a day's shooting, I'm afraid; I have a horrid lot of letters to write and post before dinner."

"Yes, my fine fellow," thought the old gentleman; "and you'll have a particularly horrid lot of letters to read too! Or rather, you'll have to hear them read; because I doubt whether it would be safe to place them in your hands."

To prevent Marietta from keeping her appointment was a task of no great difficulty. As the Colonel had anticipated, she mentioned, shortly after luncheon, that she was going out for a walk, and he at once offered to accompany her. To this suggestion she demurred, alleging that he would tire himself out, tramping up hill in such a hot sun; whereupon he returned cheerfully:

"Not a bit of it, my dear; old as I am, I'm game to stand as much fatigue as you can. Besides, I meant, anyhow, to go out and meet Mr. Strahan, to whom I have a few words to say upon a matter of business."

Marietta understood and said no more. Nothing could be less probable than that her father had business matters to discuss with Mr. Strahan, nor could anything be more certain than that he would persist in fulfilling his expressed intention. At the bottom of her heart she was almost grateful to him for compelling her to postpone an encounter of which she could but dimly forecast the results. It is needless to add that the Colonel was not embarrassed by her company when he sallied forth on the road to victory; by that time she had discovered that the weather was unsuitable for exertion and

that a hammock beneath one of the spreading cedars on the lawn would satisfy her immediate desires.

The Colonel went his way with a light step and a light heart. Success in the enterprise which he had taken in hand was assured. Strahan, it was true, held a trump card in his knowledge of Marietta's illegitimacy. "But I," reflected the old gentleman exultantly, "have a whole handful of trumps. It won't help him much to bring disgrace upon us after he himself has been so disgraced that he will be practically forced to give up his present position."

To set against that, there was the obvious consideration that a ruined man could have no motive for reticence, and indeed it was only because he had realised that fact that Colonel Vigne was now about to hold parley with the enemy. It would, of course, have been simpler, and even safer, to exhibit the incriminating documents to Lionel and others; but, for the reason above specified, this plan was inadmissible, and Mr. Brydon would have to be satisfied with something short of complete and public revenge.

"Now, I don't suppose," said the Colonel to himself, "that he will give in without showing fight. It will be necessary to convince him that he would risk considerably more by refusing to come to terms than we should by telling him to do his worst, and it may even be necessary to stand on one's guard against physical violence; for, after all, I am an old fellow, and this is a thinly peopled part of the world. Well, if he tries that game, I flatter myself he will find that I hold a strongish argument in my hand."

The Colonel shook his walking-stick, which was in truth a murderous weapon, despite its inocuous aspect; for it was heavily loaded at the head and as supple as a life-preserver. He imagined himself breaking an assailant's arm with it, and almost wished that the luxury of being assaulted might be in store for him. That, however, was not a very probable contingency, nor, upon the whole, could it be deemed a desirable one. For a

duel plenty of plausible explanations can always be alleged; but a personal *fracas* seldom redounds to the credit of those concerned therein.

It was in the larch copse where Strahan had achieved his triumph on the previous day, and where the Colonel had subsequently secured means of rendering that triumph nugatory, that the two antagonists came face to face. The face of the younger man, who was slowly descending the slope, with his gun over his shoulder, wore a grave and thoughtful expression, which changed to one of displeased interrogation when he recognised the intruder upon his solitude; that of the elder was radiant with the joy of approaching battle.

"It is a fine afternoon for a walk, is it not, Mr. Strahan?" he began. "With your permission, I will bear you company for a short distance."

Strahan frowned. He perceived, of course, that his appointment with Marietta had been discovered and that this irrepressible old nuisance had determined to frustrate it. "May I ask," he inquired, "whether you came out in order to meet me?"

The Colonel's head was bowed in affable assent. "Perhaps you did not expect me to meet you? Perhaps you expected somebody else to meet you?" he suggested.

Strahan stood still and looked straight into the blue eyes which met his. "Colonel Vigne," said he, "I beg to warn you that it is possible to get to the end of my patience. I certainly did not expect to meet you, and whether I expected to meet anybody else or not is my own affair. Please, be so good as to continue your walk and allow me to continue mine. After what passed between us yesterday, we really can have nothing further to say to one another."

"You forget," returned the Colonel pleasantly, "that when we parted yesterday I undertook to let you have an answer to certain representations of yours. I am now ready with my answer, which is very much at your service. You can spare me a quarter of an hour

or twenty minutes, I dare say; in such weather as this one doesn't want to hurry. Indeed, my daughter, who spoke of taking a walk after luncheon, decided that it was too hot to do anything but sit in the garden, and I should probably have remained with her if I had not heard you mention that you would be returning early."

"Then," observed Strahan, who did not relish the idea that he had been made a fool of either by Colonel Vigne or by Lady Middlewood, "you must have heard me mention that I had letters to write. Will you be so good as to make any statement that you may have to make without further loss of time?"

"I will," the Colonel replied. "The statement that I have to make is briefly this. The unfortunate girl Maggie Field, who drowned herself to escape the consequences of her shame during your last term at Oxford, was betrayed and ruined by you; you allowed or encouraged another undergraduate to act in such a way that he was assumed to be the guilty person and that you got off scot-free; I propose—in the event of your declining the conditions which I shall offer you—to make this known to my son-in-law and to his friends; and I think, Mr. Strahan, that neither your reputation nor your prospects of advancement in life will be likely to survive that disclosure."

"Now, my dear sir," said Strahan, in accents of compassionate remonstrance, "what can you possibly expect to gain by casting back to that foolish old menace and that mendacious old story? I hoped I had convinced you in London of the absurdity of attempting to intimidate me in that way."

"I admit," answered the Colonel, "that the attempt was absurd then; it is not so absurd now that I am backed up by proofs in your own handwriting. You should have known better than to enter into correspondence with your victim. Fortunately for me, however, you did not know better, and still more fortunately, the correspondence has come into my possession. Shall I read you a few extracts from it?"

Without waiting for a reply, he took the bundle of letters from his pocket, selected two or three of them for withdrawal from their envelopes and proceeded to read aloud passages which placed the relations between their recipient and their writer beyond a doubt. "You will perceive," he remarked, in conclusion, "that I can establish the truth of my statement."

"I perceive," answered Strahan quietly, "that you think so. How and where did you procure those letters?"

"Yours," observed the Colonel, "is a very natural curiosity; but you must excuse me. I do not feel called upon to gratify it."

"As you please. I was only wondering whether the forgery was a skilful one or not."

"Mr. Strahan," said the Colonel, "you know very well that these letters are not forgeries. It seems to me that we shall save time by admitting facts and then considering, as men of the world, how the facts affect our respective positions. You know something about me which I do not wish my daughter or those connected with her to hear; I know something about you which, if divulged, would get you into such trouble that it would to all intents and purposes abolish you. Very well, you may say, then let us cry quits. But that won't satisfy me; and if you will think for a moment, you will see that you are far more in my power than I am in yours. I can, therefore, only consent to keep silence upon the condition that you leave this house to-morrow and England within a month. That, I should imagine, is manageable for a man who can at any moment allege that he has been summoned to Australia; if not, you will have to make it so. After all, you may consider yourself lucky; for if these letters had fallen into any hands but mine, you would scarcely have escaped exposure."

Strahan's ironically smiling countenance betrayed no sign of his inward fury and perplexity. It was an indisputable fact that this exasperating old marplot had,

by some means or other, contrived to gain possession of evidence which might be used against him with deadly effect, and he was almost disposed to come to terms. Not, indeed, to such terms as Colonel Vigne offered—for it would in no way suit him to leave England—but to others which might perhaps be found equally acceptable. The sacrifice of a woman's love would be but a trifling matter in comparison with the relinquishment of his ambitious schemes and dreams. Nevertheless, he hated to be beaten, and was not prepared to acknowledge himself beaten yet. So his curt rejoinder was:

"Just let me look at those precious papers of yours, will you?"

The Colonel laughed and fell back a step. "No, my dear sir," he replied; "those papers are a little too precious to be allowed out of my hands into yours. You won't get them from me, I can assure you, by anything short of main force."

Possibly this rather unwise speech suggested temptation to a man who was as active and as muscular as a cat. Be that as it may, the poor Colonel's wrist was instantly gripped, his arm was twisted with a violence which wrung an involuntary cry of pain from him, and the letters fell from his powerless fingers. But the right hand which held his walking-stick was free, and with it he aimed a blow at his assailant which Strahan ducked like lightning to avoid. The result of this was that he himself very nearly fell headlong to the ground, and that in another moment he had been deprived of his weapon.

"Really, Colonel Vigne," said Strahan, "I am extremely sorry to have had to attack a man of your years, but it is quite essential that I should be able to examine these forgeries, and for the present I must take the liberty of retaining them. Pray, don't excite yourself—oh, no! you won't get hold of the gun, nor of your stick either until you have cooled down. Damn it, man! stand off, will you! Do you want me to knock you down?"

For the Colonel, purple with passion, had flung himself upon his enemy, whom he had caught by the throat, and so tenacious was his clutch that for a few seconds Strahan was in no small danger of being choked. Old though he now was, Colonel Vigne had once been a powerful man; at such close quarters it was impossible to knock him down, and his weight rendered him for the moment a somewhat awkward customer. But the struggle was a short one. Strahan's knee was driven against the other's breastbone with a force which deprived him alike of breath and strength, and he fell backward, gasping and panting.

Strahan also was panting. "You old lunatic!" he muttered, as he stooped to pick up the gun and the stick which he had allowed to drop, "I shall have to kill you before I have done with you!"

"You will, sir!" returned the Colonel hoarsely; "you may take your oath of that!"

He had got his breath back, and his renewed onslaught was made with such rapidity and determination that it was really necessary to bring him to his senses—or to deprive him of them. The latter was the result of the hasty stroke which Strahan aimed at the head of the old man, whose hat had fallen off. It was a hasty stroke and also a heavier one than had been intended by the striker, who did not realise until too late what a formidable instrument the stick which he had seized was.

The Colonel stopped as if he had been shot, swayed for a moment like a drunken man, and then fell heavily upon his face, the blood flowing fast through his gray hair. Strahan dropped at once upon his knees beside the unconscious man, whose collar he loosened and whose heart, to his immense relief, he found to be still beating.

"By George!" he muttered, "I was afraid I had taken him at his word and made an end of him! It's a bad job, anyhow; for how the deuce this is to be accounted for and explained away is more than I can imagine!"

The situation was, without doubt, very serious as it stood; yet it might, from one moment to another, become infinitely more so. Of this Strahan was made aware by unmistakable signs, and before he had decided what to do, or whether anything could be done, the worst had happened. The old man, whose face he was anxiously watching, drew a long breath and shuddered from head to foot; then his jaw fell, and a film came over his upturned eyeballs.

"Good God!" cried Strahan, starting to his feet, "what infernal luck!"

The exclamation was characteristic enough, and even more characteristic were the terms in which he proceeded to apostrophise himself. "Don't lose your head! It's a question now of saving your neck, and there's no time to spare. Everything will depend upon your keeping your wits about you for the next hour or two."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PRESENCE OF MIND.

It is in moments of sudden emergency that the difference between a big man and a little one becomes apparent, and that Strahan retained command of all his faculties under circumstances which might well have stupefied him proved him, no doubt, to be one of the capable members of our race. It is really a very horrible thing to have committed murder, and even deliberate murderers, as the records of criminal cases abundantly testify, are apt to overlook details, the discovery of which ends by bringing them to the gallows. The others —those who, like Strahan, are guiltless of having ever intended to take a fellow creature's life—almost invariably betray themselves. But in the instance of this

man the instinct of self-preservation was seconded by a brain so cool and so clear that he dismissed no aspect of the case from him, save that which it was imperative upon him to postpone. Regret, remorse, and all such emotions might, and indeed must, be deferred until he should have leisure to indulge in them; for the time being, what he had to do was to clear himself of any possible suspicion of having been concerned in the death of Lady Middlewood's father.

First of all, he satisfied himself that there were no stains of blood upon his hands or his clothes. Had there been any, it would not have been very difficult to account for them; still it was just as well that there were none. Then he examined very carefully the scene of the struggle and ascertained that the hard ground was free from trace of footprints. The weather had for some time past been so dry, and the grass was so short that this danger did not exist. His next step was to pick up the stick with which the fatal blow had been struck, and to which some coagulated blood and a few gray hairs adhered. He dropped it again beside the body, saying to himself:—

"That tells nothing, except what one wants to be told."

So far, then, there was no evidence against him, and his only fear was that his victim's fingers might have left red marks upon his throat. Upon that point, in the absence of a looking-glass, it was impossible to avoid misgivings; but as, in any case, he could not have concealed such marks, it was a waste of time to think about them. There remained the probability of Colonel Vigne's having told his daughter whither he was bound. He had alleged, to be sure, that she had found it too hot to go out for a walk; but that statement seemed to lack verisimilitude, and had been put forward, moreover, in mocking accents which had implied that the speaker did not mean it to be accepted literally. The chances were that Marietta had been prevented from keeping her appointment by her father, who

must somehow have become aware of it, and had probably offered to be the bearer of her excuses. That might be serious—yet it could scarcely be supposed that any resultant altercation could have ended so tragically.

Strahan looked at his watch.

"There isn't much more time," he murmured; "I may be called upon to account for every minute that has elapsed since I left those fellows. Now, what about motives? Shall I take his money and his watch? Yes; upon the whole, I had better—though it's a risk. This is a lonely spot, and it isn't inconceivable that he might have encountered some loafing tramp."

The rifling of the corpse was a somewhat ghastly task; but Strahan's nerves were strong, and he did not forget to search the Colonel's pockets for any stray letters, in addition to those of which he had already possessed himself. This being accomplished, he picked up his gun, and started at a round trot down the hill towards Middlewood. Just before emerging from the copse he flung the dead man's watch and chain away into the undergrowth. It was better to do that, he thought, than to run the chance of being detected with such damning evidence upon his person; besides which, the discovery of the watch, which was sure to ensue, could be made to fit in well enough with the story which he meant to tell.

That simple story was quite ready for narration by the time that he came within sight of the great house, and he only did what anybody else would have done in his place by making for the stable-yard instead of the principal entrance. He found, as he had expected, several helpers standing about in the yard, and one of them, in response to his breathless request, immediately summoned the stud-groom.

"I want to speak to you," Strahan said, as soon as the burly little man appeared. "A shocking thing has happened. Colonel Vigne has been murdered. I found him lying stone-dead in the plantation on my

way down from the moor. As far as I could judge, his skull has been fractured by a life-preserver."

"Good Gawd!" ejaculated the stud-groom. "What! —in broad daylight?"

"Well—evidently. But what we must do now is to send some men to carry him home, and to take care that Lady Middlewood does not hear what has happened. Of course it will be a fearful shock to her, and really I don't feel quite equal to telling her the news. Do you know what time his lordship is expected back?"

"There was a brake ordered to meet his lordship and the other gentlemen on the Chelton side of the moor in about three-quarters of an hour, sir," answered the man. "We was just going to send it out."

"Ah—well, perhaps the best plan will be for me to go in it," said Strahan, "and I can give information to the police on the way. Of course that ought to be done at once. Meanwhile, you had better send four men with a hurdle up to the plantation, and tell them to wait there, without disturbing anything, until a policeman comes. Sometimes, you know, in cases of murder, a most important clue is lost through the body having been displaced, or the ground trampled upon."

"Just so, sir," agreed the stud-groom, with a look of respectful admiration.

He remarked to one of his subordinates, after the brake had been brought out and driven away, with its pale, but composed occupant, that that there Mr. Strahan was a gentleman as had a head upon his shoulders; and, indeed, it must be confessed that the compliment was not undeserved.

"The weak point of the case," mused Strahan, while he was being driven across the park, "is that the apocryphal criminal who will be searched for far and wide during the next few days, may almost be proved to be apocryphal. The difficulty of escaping unnoticed from a neighbourhood where there are so few railway stations, and so very few passengers, would approach impossibility. However, that can't be helped; I believe

I have taken every precaution that could be taken to insure my own safety. But I wish I knew what my throat looks like!"

He pulled up the soft stock which he was wearing as high as it would go, and sat with his head bent forward. It was a natural attitude for one who had just passed through a startling and distressing experience to assume, and he maintained it while conversing with the village constable, whom, as luck would have it, he overtook on the road. He maintained it also when, on reaching his destination, he found the sportsmen sitting on the turf by the wayside. He was greeted with shouts of surprised interrogation; but to these he paid no heed. Descending hastily, he drew Lionel aside, and said:

"Old man, I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news; but I thought the kindest thing I could do, for Lady Middlewood's sake, was to come and meet you, so as to give you a little time to think about how this is to be broken to her."

His tale was soon told, and Lionel, though greatly distressed, as well as enraged against the unknown perpetrator of so foul a crime, did not lose his presence of mind. He thanked his friend heartily, saying:

"You have done everything that could possibly be done. It only remains to telegraph to all the nearest stations on the line; in that way we can hardly fail to catch the fellow. One thing I think I can say for certain—he must have been a stranger in these parts; and that should make it easy to identify him."

"I'll see to that," answered Strahan; "I don't mind the walk, and you had better not go out of your way. You ought to get home as quickly as possible."

"Will you, like a good fellow? I understand what you mean; it would be an awful business if poor Marietta were to see, without any warning, what there is some danger of her seeing. How I am to tell her that her father has been killed God only knows! Poor, dear old chap! Well, there's no use in talking about it."

He jumped into the brake and was soon out of sight.

It was, of course, most important that he should reach home in advance of a certain mournful procession which Marietta might, by ill fortune, descry from the garden, and Strahan had given him to understand that he could accomplish this if he made haste. On the way he informed his companions of the catastrophe which had occurred, begging them to excuse him if he should fail to show himself at dinner. Lady Middlewood, naturally, would be unable to appear. "And as for me," he added, "I may have to take the evening train to London, so as to look them up at Scotland Yard. It won't do to let the grass grow under our feet."

He was far more likely to be wanted at home than in Scotland Yard; but, being by nature a man of action, his impulse was to do something. Perhaps, too, he wished to think as little as might be about the first and most painful duty which lay before him. Strahan had considerately suggested that he should profit by the interval of time granted to him to think about it; but how could the shock of such an announcement be softened? There is, in truth, no known method of breaking evil tidings gently, and probably the most merciful plan is to blurt out the truth in a few words. Such, at all events, was the plan adopted by Lionel when he found his wife reposing in her hammock under the cedar tree, with a novel in her hand and one foot swinging lazily just off the ground. His unwonted display of affection in bending over her to kiss her forehead and the gravity of the accents in which he exhorted her to be brave caused her at once to start up into a sitting posture.

"Something horrible has happened!" she cried. "Don't look at me like that—tell me instantly! Is it Bob?"

"No," answered Lionel; "it isn't Bob."

"Then," she exclaimed, "it is my father! He is dead!"

She expected to hear of apoplexy. She had noticed of late that the old man's strength was not equal to

the demands which he habitually made upon it, and an uphill walk under so hot a sun might easily have proved too much for him. But when she was told that his had been a violent death, a terrible fear seized her which drove all the blood back to her heart. He had started, she knew, with the intention of meeting one towards whom he was not too favourably disposed, and that the two men must have met seemed certain. She could scarcely force herself to gasp out, "Who did it?"

"We cannot imagine," her husband answered. "Strahan, who found him and gave the alarm, says he searched the copse, but could discover no trace of the murderer. One can only suppose that robbery was the motive and that the blow was not intended to be fatal."

Marietta's fervent ejaculation of "Thank God!" which Lionel remembered in after days, puzzled him a little at the time; but he assumed that she had not all her wits about her.

"We shall catch the scoundrel, though," he added, encouragingly; "I haven't a doubt of that. His best chance, as he probably knows, is to make for Manchester, and it will be odd if we can't manage to stop that earth. Oh, we shall catch him!"

But catching him and hanging him would not bring poor old Colonel Vigne back to life. This was, in effect, what Marietta said through her tears, which had begun to flow fast. She had loved her father, who had always been indulgent and had seemed, somehow, to understand her better than anybody else did, and now that a sudden load of terror had been removed from her mind, she had leisure to become inconsolable. Lionel consoled her to the best of his ability—which was not saying very much. If her father had understood her, her husband most assuredly did not. For so long she had repelled him, for so long she had responded coldly to any advance on his part, that his pride had ended by acquiescing in an estrangement which she appeared to desire, and even now he could find nothing but commonplaces with which to meet her lamentations.

"Where is Mr. Strahan?" she asked at last. "I must see him! He will tell me everything, and he, I am sure, will be really sorry for me."

"He has gone to send some telegrams," answered Lionel, who could not, under the circumstances, resent this rather unkind implication; "but he ought to be here soon. Of course you shall see him, if you wish."

Strahan at that moment had no great wish to see her. From his mind also the oppression of fear and anxiety had been partially lifted, and he, too, was free to indulge in regrets which were very sincere. Because he had thought, and had been forced to think, of himself first, it did not follow that he was more callous than his neighbours; and, as a matter of fact, he was grieved to the heart to think that his had been the hand to slay Marietta's father. To be sure, she would never know (or he hoped she never would) that he had been guilty of that crime; yet there are moments when even the coolest and most selfish of us must realise that what signifies is not so much what others know about us as what we know about ourselves, and Strahan's earnest desire was to escape the ordeal of an immediate interview with Lady Middlewood.

"Of course," said he to himself, "I am not morally guilty of murder; for heaven knows I had no intention of hurting the unfortunate old fellow, much less of killing him, and nobody has any business to die of a mere tap on the head with a walking-stick. Still it remains a fact that I did kill him, and it is even on the cards that she may have suspicions of me. I won't meet her until to-morrow if I can possibly help it."

He did not, therefore, hurry back to Middlewood—nor, had he been so minded, could he have hurried; for he deemed it wise to destroy, without further loss of time, the letters which he had secured, and this proved a long business. He had to burn them one by one, scattering the black fragments to the winds, and there were a good many of them. The collection in fact included, to the best of his belief and memory,

every scrap of writing that he had ever addressed to Maggie Field, and it gave him a queer sensation to reflect that these sheets of note-paper which he was now carefully annihilating had caused two deaths. In both cases the victim had been a good deal more to blame than the executioner. For choice, one would rather not be an executioner; but Strahan could not feel much remorse upon the subject of Maggie Field, whom no man in his senses would have consented to marry. He had given her excellent advice; he had even given her such money as he had been able to spare; was it his fault that she had spurned the one and returned the other before committing the rash act which had so nearly brought about the ruin of her lover?

"As for Colonel Vigne," he continued, "I believe the poor old gentleman must have died in a fit; the blow in itself could hardly have been sufficient to cause death. By the way, I wonder how on earth he came to be in possession of these letters! I would have given a good price for them at one time; but as they were not produced it seemed evident that they must either have been destroyed by Maggie or retained by Bessie—who was not likely to betray me, poor soul! Now, I can't suppose that the Colonel sought out Bessie, or that she would have given up the letters to him if he had. Consequently, we have the probable existence of an intermediary, or of several intermediaries—which may prove devilish awkward! Upon the whole one is by no means out of the wood yet, although it is something to have abolished documentary evidence."

The abolition of documentary evidence being completed, he made for the house at a brisk pace, stopping to wash his hands, which had been blackened by his task, in a pool. It was, as he perceived, quite within the bounds of possibility that he might soon be arrested, and it behoved him to neglect no precaution, however trifling.

On his arrival, the butler, who appeared to have been waiting for him, informed him, in a hushed voice, that

the body had been brought in. "The pockets rifled, sir, but the watch and chain picked up only a few yards off in the brushwood, which looks as if them villains had been disturbed; and the doctor, as was sent for by his lordship's orders, he thinks as life couldn't have been extinct but a very short time when you found the poor gentleman."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Strahan, with much apparent concern. "Well, there wasn't a sign or a sound of anybody in the neighbourhood that I could detect. I wish I had searched more carefully; but of course my first impulse was to run down here and give the alarm."

"Just so, sir. But his lordship is confident that justice will be done; and her ladyship, if you please, sir, sent word that she would like to speak to you as soon as you came in."

So that bad quarter of an hour, it seemed, was not to be avoided.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"SOME PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN."

STRAHAN was shown into the room which had been fitted up as a boudoir for Lady Middlewood, and he found her seated at her writing-table—though she was not writing, nor had she, apparently, been so occupied. She raised her head, as he entered, from the clasped hands upon which it had been resting and stared vacantly at him for a moment. Then she said:

"Oh, yes, I remember; I asked them to let me see you."

"I did not think," he replied, with perfectly genuine sympathy and regret, "that we should meet like this to-day."

"No," agreed Marietta, in slow, bewildered accents, "you expected something quite different, of course. So did I. It all seems such a long time ago!"

She resumed, after a short pause, "The reason why I wanted to see you was that I thought you might perhaps be able to tell me a little more than Lionel could, or did. Anyhow, I should like to hear the whole story from your own lips, if you don't mind."

"I am afraid," answered Strahan, "that I can only repeat to you what I told him. I am absolutely in the dark as to who committed the crime, if that is what you are thinking of; although I had just heard that his pockets were found empty, which seems to point to robbery as the motive. All I can say is that as soon as I had recovered a little from the shock of discovering your poor father's body, and had convinced myself that he was really dead, I made a hasty examination of the wood without coming upon the trace of another human being. The truth was that, as you may imagine, my first thought was for you, and I was in terror lest at any moment you might appear. I had been anticipating your appearance, you see."

She nodded and sighed. "You think, then, that he was killed—stupidly and vulgarly, just for the sake of any valuables that he might have upon him—by some lurking poacher or tramp?"

"I can imagine nothing else; though it sounds improbable. He had no enemy in this neighbourhood, I suppose?"

"He had none anywhere that I know of. Unless you could be counted as an enemy of his. He may have regarded you—I almost think that he did regard you as such; and so, when Lionel told me what had happened, I was frightened for a minute. It occurred to me——"

"I know," interrupted Strahan boldly; "I had a presentiment that that ghastly idea would occur to you. But no idea, if you think of it for a moment, could well be more extravagant. I am what you please—and you

have called me by some hard names before now—but I am scarcely the man to commit a wanton, purposeless murder. And even if I were, the very last person in the world, next to yourself, whom I should have been likely to select as my victim would have been the one to whom I believe you were more attached than to anybody else."

Marietta smiled faintly. "I imagined a quarrel and an exchange of blows," she answered. "He was hot-tempered and he had many quarrels when he was younger, I believe. But it was only for a moment that I felt frightened; I was sure that, whatever he might have said or done, you would keep cool. Besides, it was inconceivable that you would strike a man of his age."

"I should hope so!"

"Yes; and it was not because I had the faintest shadow of a misgiving that I sent for you. It was only because, as I said just now, I wanted you to give me every detail that you could, and also"—she broke off to swallow down her tears—"and also because I knew you would sympathise with me. For indeed it is quite true that I cared more for my father than I do for anybody else."

Strahan proved equal to the task imposed upon him; it would not have been easy to impose upon him any task to which he would have shown himself unequal, and if this was in many respects a gruesome and repulsive one, all the more remarkable were his skill and courage in facing it. He furnished Marietta with mendacious details; he assured her, both verbally and by other methods, of his fullest and truest sympathy; he even went so far as to imply that, although she might love nobody as she had loved her father, there was one still living who, at all events, loved her more passionately than the dead man could possibly have done.

But to such hints she appeared quite deaf and blind—so deaf and blind that he had much ado to restrain himself from becoming more explicit. He was not insensible to the fact that a vast gulf, a gulf more vast

and more impassable than the mere circumstance of her being a married woman could ever have created, now yawned between them; yet he had not once, in all the course of their acquaintanceship, loved her and longed for her as he did at that moment. When she dismissed him, he raised her hand, which was limp and cold, to his lips, and, glancing up, he saw a curious expression in her swimming eyes which he was unable to interpret. Was it displeasure or dislike or merely wonder? He could not tell, and her voice did not enlighten him, as she said, "Thank you. Good-bye."

She had the air of taking leave of him; although she must have been aware that he could not quit the house, as the other guests were doubtless about to do, seeing that his evidence would be needed at one inquiry, if not at more than one, prescribed by the law of the land. Possibly she wished him to understand that a certain chapter in her life had been finally closed by this tragedy. If so, he could not do better than take her at her word and liberate himself without discredit from an entanglement which had now become doubly complicated and embarrassing. He made that reflection, recognised its wisdom, muttered a curse, and ended by laughing rather dismally.

"To think that any woman on earth should have the power to make me hesitate at such a parting of the ways! So much for one's strong will and one's tolerably unimpaired faculty for seeing things as they are! However, when it comes to the actual point, I shall take the right road and turn my back upon her. As we are not quite at that point yet I may enjoy the luxury of indecision a little longer."

But that was only a way of speaking; for to him indecision could not be a luxury. Nor, perhaps, would he have been able to leave a crucial question open during the days that followed had the demand upon his time and his wits with regard to other matters been less urgent. His time was placed entirely at the disposal of Lord Middlewood, the county constabulary,

and a London detective; his wits were successfully devoted to averting suspicions which, oddly enough, were entertained by nobody. His evidence at the inquest was given in so clear and straightforward a manner, and his story so plainly bore the impress of truth that even the detective, who was a good deal vexed at being able to detect nothing, was forced reluctantly to accord the gentleman a tacit acquittal. There was absolutely no evidence to submit to the jury beyond the bare facts that the deceased had evidently been killed by a blow from his own stick, and that he had been despoiled of his watch and his money; so a verdict of wilful murder was returned against some person or persons unknown, and the guardians of law and order could but scratch their perplexed heads.

Then for a short time it seemed as if an important clue had been secured. The landlord of the village public-house came forward to state that "a party by the name of Brown," who had been lodging under his roof for a week or more, had left somewhat suddenly on the very evening of the murder without stating whither he was bound. On being soundly rated for having withheld this information, the man replied that nobody could ever have suppose such a poor, feeble creature as Brown to be capable of murder. Moreover, he himself had been absent for several days on business, and did not even know of the lodger's departure until his missus had mentioned it casual-like. Upon the whole, he opined that if anybody ought to be badgered about the matter it was his missus, not he. His missus was accordingly badgered, and responded by numerous contradictory assertions. These, when sifted, appeared to show that the mysterious Brown had been a person of sadly intemperate habits and deplorable health. According to the landlady, he had scarcely been sober at all during his sojourn, and had spent nearly the whole of his time lying flat upon his back on his bed. Otherwise what she might term 'armless. Really could not say whether he had been in the house or out of it on the

afternoon named—not if she was to be put upon her oath. Was inclined to believe that he had been out, which he sometimes did go out after his dinner, if in a condition to walk without assistance. Upon second thoughts was almost sure—though not going to swear about it, mind you—that he had been in his bedroom the whole afternoon. Certainly had not supplied him with liquor when in a state of intoxication, and them as said such things ought to know better. Finally burst into tempestuous weeping, and declared that if she was to be tried for complicity in a murder, tried she must be and hung by the neck until she was dead; but, having told the whole blessed truth, not another word was she going to say, and if her husband had been a man —which he was no such thing—he would not have stood by and seen her put upon as she had been. So there!

The so-called Brown was traced as far as the Manchester railway-station, at which point he appeared to have vanished into infinite space, and no success attended the subsequent efforts of Lionel and Strahan, the latter of whom, it may be conjectured, would have been less keen had he suspected that the man of whom he was in search was no other than his old college acquaintance Brydon. For the rest, all that could be learnt about the man pointed to the probability of his innocence. It seemed doubtful whether he could have had the requisite strength to wrest Colonel Vigne's stick out of that sturdy old gentleman's hands, and very unlikely that he could have made his escape in time to leave the place, as he was proved to have done, by the 4.45 train.

"In short," remarked St. Quintin, "one is driven to the conclusion that if Strahan doesn't know who did this thing, nobody will ever know."

St. Quintin, by Lionel's request, had not taken part in the general exodus which had naturally followed the family bereavement, and it was to Betty Mallet, who, with her grandmother, had likewise remained

at Middlewood, that he made the above rather equivocal speech.

"You dislike Mr. Strahan, of course," answered Betty, with some indignation; "but really I don't think you ought to say such things as that. What do you mean?"

"Only that, as he saw nothing of the murderer, and as he seems to be absolutely the only human being who could have seen anything of him, there is not much chance of the mystery being cleared up. I wasn't accusing him of being himself the criminal."

"Then you shouldn't talk as if you were," returned Betty sharply. "Sometimes you make me feel quite ashamed of you—or at least for you—by the things that you say. I don't think I ever met anybody whose prejudices were so strong or so vindictive as yours."

St. Quintin repeated that he had not meant to bring an accusation, which was monstrous upon the face of it. Nevertheless, he remembered a certain conversation which he had had in London with Colonel Vigne; he knew that the two men had not been upon the best of terms, and in his heart of hearts he believed Strahan capable of anything. Such reflections, however, were reserved for his heart of hearts, in which inner sanctuary they had others of a milder, but not less lugubrious character to keep them company. Not being blessed with the faculty of self-deception, St. Quintin was well aware that he was not, and never could be, a possible aspirant for Betty Mallet's hand; so that there seemed to be no reason for prolonging his stay in a house where there was nothing more for him to do. All the same, he did not particularly relish the idea of leaving Strahan behind him, and when he announced his impending departure, he was glad to hear the latter say:

"Well, I believe I ought to be off too. They want me in London, it seems, and I am afraid I can be of little use here. Of course, though, I'll manage to stay if I can help you in any way, Middlewood."

"No, my dear fellow," answered Lionel, with a

despondent shrug of his shoulders; "I doubt whether you can, thanks very much. I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, and perhaps, by continuing to cast about, one may hit off the scent eventually; but for the present one is completely at fault."

He was so completely at fault that his chances of success looked small indeed, and there was a grim irony in Strahan's meditative remark of, "Casting forward or back becomes a waste of time when the scent is cold. I almost think that, if I were you, I should give up the attempt."

"I shall never do that," answered Lionel quietly; "but it's a case for patience and constant vigilance rather than for active measures. You'll think me a fool for saying so, I dare say, but I have a presentiment that I shall end by collaring that ruffian and bringing him to the gallows. Evidence must exist, you see, though we have failed to discover it, so far."

Strahan was able to smile indulgently, notwithstanding a passing shudder and sense of chilliness. To talk about presentiments was, of course, to talk rubbish; but it was disagreeably true that evidence of some sort must exist. Somebody must assuredly be aware that Colonel Vigne at the time of his death had acquired certain documents, of which only one person could be interested in depriving him. That was as much as to say that somebody might at any moment make an extremely awkward revelation. He asked himself whether he should go to Oxford—an obviously risky step—or whether, like Lionel, he should maintain an attitude of patient vigilance. His dislike of suspense inclined him towards the former alternative; but there was little else to recommend it. The person (there could not but be such a person) who knew that Colonel Vigne had got hold of Maggie Field's letters had so far remained silent: it might, therefore, be assumed that he or she had no immediate intention of speaking, and sleeping dogs are best left undisturbed. On the other hand, to pursue a policy of inactivity with a noose round one's neck and

an invisible executioner at the other end of the cord requires a good deal of self-control.

But self-control was precisely the quality upon which Strahan most prided himself, and had the best reason to pride himself; so that the farewell audience which was accorded to him by Marietta some hours later found him thoroughly master of his words and actions. He read her face well enough to understand that indiscretion on his part was neither expected nor likely to be permitted; but he also gathered that she had sent for him (when it would have been quite simple to omit doing so) because, in spite of herself, she could not make up her mind to relinquish her hold over him. So he said the things which she evidently wished him to say, and received, in the shape of unspoken gratitude, the reward which his reticence had earned.

"I hope," Marietta said, as she gave him the signal to withdraw by rising from her chair, "that we may meet again before very long; I have so few friends! But perhaps you will have gone back to Australia by the time that we are next in London."

Strahan shook his head. "I think not. There is always a possibility of my being summoned to the other side of the world; but I shall certainly not obey the summons if I can help it. I could not leave England now without leaving—well, without leaving friends who can never be replaced."

That was putting the case so mildly that she was fain to smile upon him. "I think," she remarked, "that with you work will always serve as an excellent substitute for friends."

"You think so? Yes; I thought so once, and not very long ago either. But I won't talk about that: I must get back to my work now, at all events."

"Do you mean," she asked, "that you are really going to settle down in London once more at this time of year?"

He nodded. "For a time I must: afterwards I may perhaps pay a few visits."

Her eyes inquired whom he proposed to visit; but as she did not put the question into words, he left it unanswered—being satisfied to note that she was not indifferent upon the subject. It was with an air of respectful deference that he presently resumed:

"Lady Middlewood, you were so good as to imply just now that you consider me your friend, and it isn't necessary for me to say how I feel about you. Will you treat me as a friend, and write to me if at any time I can serve you, no matter in how trifling a way? I can't express myself very well; but I hope you understand."

She did not altogether understand; still she was thankful to him both for what he had said and for what he had left unsaid. "Oh, yes," she answered, averting her eyes; "and I won't forget. I know you will do all you can to help me and Lionel in what we both have most at heart just now. Perhaps I may write to you about that some day."

So what Strahan had mentally called the luxury of indecision was to be prolonged, after all. "When one comes to think of it," he reflected, with a subsequent shrug of his shoulders, "there wasn't much choice between that and a plain-spoken rupture. One is what one is; yet one retains certain scruples. Was ever a man in such an *impasse* before! I don't see how it is going to end—but I see that I shall have a letter from her very soon."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SOLITUDE À DEUX.

STRAHAN and St. Quintin had to travel up to London by the same train—an arrangement desired by neither of them, but one which could not very well be

avoided. Betty Mallet, who, with her brother, had accompanied them to the front door, where a carriage was in waiting, deemed it advisable to pluck St. Quintin by the sleeve and whisper:

"See that ye fall not out by the way!"

"I never," replied St. Quintin gravely, "fall out with anybody, unless I am attacked."

Betty's uplifted eyebrows expressed great surprise. "Is it possible! Well, I should like, just as a matter of harmless curiosity, to know when I have attacked you."

"Never, that I am aware of. And I am not aware of our having fallen out either."

"Now that," said Betty, "is what I call humbug; and humbug, if you'll excuse my telling you so, is not becoming to your style of beauty. At the same time, while you are at it, you might as well try to humbug Mr. Strahan a little. Not, of course, that you will succeed; only there would be no harm done if you could restrain yourself during the journey from telling him in unequivocal language what you think of him. I am sure he knows what you think of him just as well as I know what you think of me; so a breach of the peace isn't necessary."

"I doubt very much," answered St. Quintin, "whether you know what I think of you. Strahan probably does know what I think of him, and certainly doesn't care. You need have no fear of any breach of the peace."

He could say no more; for his travelling companion had already stepped into the carriage, and there was not too much time to spare.

The painful impression which he took away with him was that Betty felt a personal interest in the preservation of that detested travelling companion from annoyance or assault. And this impression would have received indirect confirmation if he had heard what Lady Maria said to her grandson about Strahan shortly afterwards.

"So Betty has been bereaved of her two admirers," the old lady placidly remarked. "Yes, my dear boy, they are both of them admirers, and there is no occasion to look horrified. Poor Mr. St. Quintin, the state of whose feelings I have only discovered within the last few days, is perfectly harmless. It stands to reason that he would never do, and he is so reasonable that he will never attempt to make himself do. As for the other—Betty seems to like him, and he is a rising man, and really, after all the trouble that she has got herself into—what do you think?"

"I should be very sorry," answered Lionel, with a frown, "to think that you or she were contemplating what I can't believe that Strahan himself contemplates. I like Strahan; he is an uncommonly clever fellow, and I dare say he will distinguish himself even more than he has done. But he isn't, and I don't see how he ever can be, quite in a position to marry one's sister."

Lady Maria shrugged her shoulders. "You are such a Tory! As if Toryism hadn't come to an end for good and all when Dizzy betrayed us with his Reform Bill ever so long ago, and as if anybody wasn't a match for anybody else nowadays! Why, even my poor, dear Halsted—but I won't go back to that. What we have to face, you see, is that in the first place, that escapade of Betty's has done her serious mischief, and in the second, that she is neither to be led nor driven. Better a Strahan than a Jocelyn, if it comes to that! However, I don't mean to say that I wish her to be restricted to such a choice; I only mean that we might do worse. Meanwhile, I have a good many invitations to country houses, which I think ought to be accepted for her sake, old though I am and much as I hate staying with people. So I am afraid we must leave you to-morrow."

"Isn't that rather soon?" asked Lionel dubiously. Lady Maria thought not. She pointed out that neither she nor her granddaughter were in mourning, and that the late Colonel Vigne, though a very nice old gentleman, whose tragic end had caused them both the deep-

est sorrow, had been no blood-relation of theirs. She had been praying and would continue to pray, she said, for the repose of his soul ("Such a comfort to be able to pray for the repose of one's friends' souls and infringe no dogma of the Anglican Church!"), but one's first duty, after all, is to the living, and more matrimonial engagements are brought about, upon the whole, by country visits than by London seasons. "Besides," she added, "I do begin to feel the want of a little change myself. If by remaining here we could be of any comfort to dear Marietta, that would be another thing; but, as she prefers to shut herself up, why—our absence can make no difference to her, can it?"

The departure of Lady Maria and Betty, which took place on the ensuing day, did not, in truth, make any great difference to Marietta, who only asked to be left alone. The condition of apathetic despondency into which she had fallen since her father's death was not altogether due to that catastrophe; but it pleased her to think that it was, and that nothing could console her for the loss of the one mortal who had been in complete sympathy with her. She had never, she felt sure, been understood by Strahan, who had had the temerity to accuse her of loving him, and from whom she was almost, if not quite, glad to be delivered. There had, no doubt, been a moment when she had been ready to throw herself into his arms! but that was a past insanity, a bygone danger—swept away from her by the tragedy of her irreparable bereavement. She thought of him now as of a friend, to whom she might possibly apply in some future stress of weather, and upon whose devotion it was safe to count. He had, in a word, committed himself, while she had done no such thing; so that he had ceased to be exciting: she had no present intention of reopening communications with him by post.

It will be perceived that if poor Colonel Vigne had understood his daughter, she was very far indeed from understanding herself, and that Lord Middlewood pos-

sessed a wife whom no wise neighbour of his would have been tempted to break the tenth commandment by coveting. And the truth was that Lionel, after sitting for a while with his wife and trying to cheer her up—which he conscientiously did twice a day—was unable to regard himself as a particularly enviable man. It was not possible to cheer her up, nor did it appear that if anything could have brought about that desirable result, it would have been his company and conversation.

"I wish you wouldn't think yourself bound to waste so much time upon me," she said. "I know this sort of life must be appallingly dull for you, and of course you can't feel as I do—why should you? Don't you think it would be a better plan for you to go away somewhere and amuse yourself, like Lady Maria and Betty? Then, perhaps, when you come back, I should have more than one subject to talk about."

Lionel absolutely refused to desert his wife; but he did think it rather bad for her to harp perpetually upon one sad and mysterious subject. It was a subject which engrossed the greater part of his own attention and interest, and he did not mean to leave the mystery unsolved; still, since everything that could as yet be said respecting it had been said again and again, and since she did not care to speak about anything else, he not unfrequently found himself sitting opposite to her in enforced and perplexed silence. The police were continuing their researches, of the failure of which he duly kept her informed, day by day: that having been done, she had the air of wishing that he would take himself off, and he usually complied with her wishes at the end of a rather long quarter of an hour. He was very patient and he made every allowance for his wife: but it was evident that for the time being he was powerless to rouse or comfort her. At length, in the hope that change of scene might do some good, he suggested a move to Ludworth.

"You have always liked the place better than this,"

he remarked, "and for the matter of that, so do I. Suppose we flit? Or would you care to run abroad again for a few weeks?"

She shook her head. "I would rather not go anywhere beyond reach of news which may come from one moment to another," she answered. "Besides, you detest foreign countries."

"Oh, there's the telegraph; one can't be beyond reach of news nowadays. As for me, I certainly shouldn't detest any place that you would like."

"Thanks; but there isn't any place on the Continent that I should like well enough to face the trouble and weariness of getting there."

"Ludworth, then?"

"Very well; Ludworth, if you choose. It really doesn't signify."

Lionel walked up and down the room, with his hands in his pockets. "Marietta," he said at last, "will you think me a brute if I ask you something?"

She opened her half-closed eyes and looked faintly surprised.

"I don't suppose I shall," she replied; "you are not much given to brutality. But of course one doesn't know until one hears."

"Well, I am afraid it may sound rather brutal to ask whether it is only your poor father's death that is making you so wretched. That is sufficient to make you wretched, I know; but sometimes I fancy that you may have some other trouble; and if that is so——"

"What then?" she inquired, glancing up at him, as he came to a standstill before her.

"Then it might relieve you, I should think, to tell somebody what was the matter. I'm not asking for your confidence—that is for you to grant or withhold, as you please—only, when all's said, I suppose your husband is the person in whom you might naturally be expected to confide, if you confided in anybody."

Marietta's short, unmirthful laugh jarred upon his ears and made him conscious of having said a somewhat

silly thing. "Oh, of course it doesn't follow," he made haste to add. "Only—setting aside cheap cynicisms and commonplaces—the fact remains that a woman's husband is the human being who ought to stand nearest to her."

She laughed again; she was struck for an instant by the quaintness of the notion that a woman might find relief in confessing to an unsympathetic husband that she was, or had been, or had imagined herself to be, in love with somebody else. Yet she would perhaps have done that very thing, had his appeal been a little more felicitously phrased. As it was, she merely remarked:

"A good many things aren't what they ought to be, and ought to be what they aren't. The most dutiful wife in the world would have to keep a few secrets from her husband if she only spoke French and he didn't know a word of anything but German."

"Well, if you chose to put it in that way—but—come, Marietta, *is* there any trouble that I don't know of? I dare say I am a little dull of comprehension; but probably I am not quite so dull as you make me out."

She shrugged her shoulders. "There is the perpetual, permanent trouble of being what one is," she replied.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," said Lionel.

"Of course you don't. Didn't I tell you that we don't speak the same language, you and I? You are an Englishman, whereas I am, for all practical purposes, a foreigner: perhaps that explains everything. At any rate, I can't find any other explanation of my being unintelligible, and really I haven't any confessions to make, except that I haven't money enough left to pay my dressmaker."

Lionel's brow cleared. If that was all, the dressmaker should at once be paid, and, as he happened to have his cheque-book in his pocket, it only took him

a minute to provide his wife with a larger sum than she required. He hoped that she would never allow herself to be worried about money matters, he said.

She took the slip of paper from him with a word or two of thanks and an inward ejaculation to the effect that he was too utterly impossible! She had given him —so she said to herself—a chance of winning her confidence, and his answer was to raise her wages! Well might he describe himself as being a little dull of comprehension!

More impartial critics may be of opinion that Lionel was scarcely to blame for his alleged dulness and that it would have taken a very clever man indeed to discover that Marietta wished him to persist with his queries. Anyhow, he remained under the impression that that was exactly what she did not wish, and he regulated his conduct accordingly. Not without hesitation he had asked a question which he had more than once before refrained from asking, and he had been snubbed for his pains; he was not likely to court a second rebuff. The move to Ludworth was duly accomplished soon afterwards, but this brought about no improvement in his wife's spirits, nor did he again suggest any mitigation of the solitude which she apparently preferred. For his own part he submitted uncomplainingly to that solitude, shot partridges, transacted county business, corresponded at intervals with Scotland Yard, and kept awake as long as he could after dinner. If he was a little bit bored, and if he could not help yawning sometimes, he may surely be forgiven.

As a matter of fact, however, he was not forgiven. Marietta, who herself soon became so cruelly bored that it was simply a necessity for her to condemn somebody, felt that anything would be better than a prolongation of this manner of life, and had little difficulty in concluding that she owed no consideration to a man who treated her as virtually non-existent. And so it came to pass that on a rainy day, when she was quite alone—Lionel having absented himself for forty-eight hours to

join a shooting-party on the other side of the county—she sat down to her writing-table and fulfilled the anticipations of an absent friend.

"You ask me," she wrote, "to let you know if you could be of service to me in any way, and I am taking you at your word. You would do me a very real service if you would come down here and stay with us for a short time. What monarch was it who used to open a conversation with one of his courtiers by saying politely, '*Ennuyons-nous un peu ensemble, monsieur?*' As I have nothing but the direst *ennui* to offer you, this invitation may count as a compliment; for it proves at least that I believe in your sincerity.

"We have nobody with us, and are not asking anybody. Since you left Middlewood I literally have not spoken to a civilised being, except my husband; so I leave you to imagine how entertaining you are likely to find me. On the other hand you won't find me hard to entertain! you are sure to have plenty of news to give me; but even if you are driven to fall back upon things which you have told me already, I shall not grumble—I am not as exacting as I was."

Having got so far, Marietta laid down her pen. Was it worth while to adopt that tone of rather feeble and laboured jocularity? Would not her correspondent understand perfectly well what she meant, and smile at her attempts to disguise her real meaning? Why not blurt out the truth and say, "Come to me!—I can't live without you, and I can endure my husband no longer?"

But perhaps, after all, that was not the truth; and certainly, if it was, reticence was more likely to bring about what she wished for than surrender. For the rest, she did not know with any sort of accuracy what she wished for; she did not trust Strahan, and whether she loved him or not was a question which might be answered, and had been answered, negatively or affirmatively, in accordance with her varying moods.

Upon one point alone she was quite clear: her present solitude *à deux* must be put an end to by somebody, or she would go mad. So she wound up her letter in much the same fashion as that in which she had begun it, saying to herself that its recipient would most likely be able to read between the lines. And then it would always remain open to her to assure him that he had read amiss.

When Lionel returned from his shooting-party the next day, she said carelessly: "I wrote to Mr. Strahan yesterday, asking him to run down and stay a short time with us, if he had nothing better to do. I suppose you won't mind?"

Lionel looked a good deal surprised. "Not at all," he answered; "on the contrary, I shall be very glad to see Strahan. But I thought you did not want to be troubled with visitors. Have you asked anybody else?"

"Oh, no; it was only a sudden fancy of mine. He may have heard something, you see; he promised to do all he could; and I can't help thinking that he is far cleverer than those solemn, mysterious detectives of yours. Do you know whether he is in London?"

Lionel believed not, but could not say for certain. He had heard of Strahan, not long ago, as staying with people somewhere in the West of England. "But, of course, letters will be forwarded to him from London, and I am sure he will be glad to accept your invitation, unless he is otherwise engaged. I am afraid he will have no news to give you, though—if there were any, I should have been told."

"I suppose you would, and I dare say he will be otherwise engaged. It won't matter much if he is," said Marietta listlessly. "Where did you say that he was staying?"

"I really can't remember. I think it must have been Betty who mentioned in one of her letters that she had met him. She and granny are making a sort of visitation of the counties of Devon and Somerset, you know."

Marietta made no rejoinder; but she took a mental

note of the circumstance that Mr. Strahan appeared to be upon her sister-in-law's track. She had spoken almost with sincerity, the minute before, in saying that it would not much matter if he should fail to respond to her summons; but this trifle caused her to change her ever-changing mind. She was resolved now that Strahan should come to Ludworth with his will or against it.

CHAPTER XL.

STRAHAN LOOKS MATTERS IN THE FACE.

It was at a certain picturesque old house in North Devon, where he had been staying for nearly a week, that Marietta's letter reached Strahan, to whom the sight of her handwriting was not altogether welcome. He did not at once tear open the envelope which lay on the top of a little heap of others beside his plate at the breakfast table, but hastily shifted its position. Lady Maria Halsted, or Miss Mallet, both of whom were temporary inmates of the establishment, might catch sight of and recognise the superscription—which he was not particularly anxious that they should do. The latter of these two ladies, indeed, who presently came in and seated herself beside him (whether by accident or by design, she had generally been placed by his side of late, he had noticed), disconcerted him a little by asking him whether he had heard from Marietta.

"From Lady Middlewood?" was his faintly surprised rejoiner.

Betty nodded. "I have had a line from Lionel, who says they want you to go and stay with them at Ludworth. He is afraid you will find it horribly slow; but he thinks you may be willing to perform an act of charity. Are you willing?"

Strahan hardly knew whether he was or not. "Well," he replied, "we are all going on to Wortley Manor the day after to-morrow, aren't we?"

"Granny and I are," said Betty; "I didn't know about you."

"Oh, I'm going too; I have been asked. Afterwards I may be obliged to run up to London: I can't very well say as yet. Do you and Lady Maria return home from Wortley?"

Betty believed so. "Unless they want us at Ludworth, as perhaps they may," she added.

After breakfast Strahan gathered up his correspondence and made for a sheltered bench in the garden that he knew of. Although the season was far advanced, it was still warm enough to sit out of doors in that mild climate, and he wanted to be alone. The contents of Marietta's missive, which it did not take him long to master, rendered it imperative upon him, he felt, to come to some decision, and sundry business communications which he subsequently perused with a wrinkled brow inclined him to decide against accepting her invitation.

"Let us look matters in the face," he ended by saying to himself. "The Company is not prospering; it won't and can't prosper for some time to come, while it may quite possibly collapse altogether within the next few months. Nothing can be more evident than that I ought to have a second string to my bow, and really it seems to me that I should be the very biggest fool in England to turn my back upon a charming heiress who shows a rather marked preference for my humble person. Just look at the alternative!—who but a born lunatic would ever think twice of it? Yet I do think of it, and I shall always think of it, and I shall always adore her, I suppose—ridiculous though it is of me. But surely I shall not be quite mad enough to adopt it?"

Nobody is so mad as a sensible, hard-headed man, when once he has reached the point of doubting whether

common sense and hardness of head are worth while. Strahan had scarcely reached that point yet; still there had been moments when he had been perilously near it. An elopement?—well, yes; it would have to be that or nothing. Ridiculous again, of course; but—Marietta being what she was—practically unavoidable. An elopement, then, to be followed (possibly) by the dawn of a new life in a new world, by the pursuit of ambitions which need not necessarily be abandoned, and by a happiness which was at least as likely to prove lasting as the happiness of any newly-married pair can be. That was the possibility: probability, no doubt, pointed to the usual regrets, mutual disenchantment, weariness, ruin and ultimate separation.

"And to crown all," muttered Strahan, "there is the ugly circumstance of my having killed her father! Oh, no! it's a thing to dream about; it isn't a thing to do. I wonder whether the other is a thing to do—at least, I wonder whether it is a thing that can be done. Not very easily, I suspect. Middlewood won't like it, and as for Marietta—by Jove! if I know anything of Marietta, she'll stop it. As most likely she can by simply letting her sister-in-law know what has passed between us. At the same time, the girl is her own mistress, and the old woman, for some reason best known to herself, is disposed to smile upon me. She evidently thinks that I am going to be a great man—and so, perhaps, I am—but she is an old goose to imagine that her granddaughter's value in the matrimonial market has really been depreciated by a little adventure which is already almost forgotten."

The sound of a slowly approaching footstep upon the gravel caused him to look up, and in another moment he was brought face to face with the lady to whom he had just applied an unflattering but not undeserved designation. It was not undeserved; for Lady Maria really did think that there might now be difficulty in arranging a good match for Betty, and had also formed a somewhat exaggerated estimate of Strahan's prospec-

tive importance. Misled by the extreme affability with which that clever manipulator of shares was treated in high quarters, and apprehensive lest the unmanageable Betty should at any moment be guilty of an irremediable *coup de tête*, she had made up her mind to give an invitation which she had trotted out into the garden for the express purpose of delivering, and it was in her most gracious manner that she asked:

"What do you think of doing after you leave the Wortleys, Mr. Strahan?"

Strahan replied that he had no very definite plans.

"Oh, haven't you?" said the old lady. "Well, I only asked because I shall be having a few people at Chelton next week, and if you cared to join our dull little party, we should be delighted to have you. I can't offer you much in the way of attraction, but you would get a few days' shooting, and you would help to amuse my granddaughter, who has had less amusement this autumn than I should have liked to give her, poor child!"

Strahan saw at once that the offer was not one to be refused. To accept it would commit him to nothing, and would enable him to effect a sort of compromise, since he could easily run over to Ludworth from Chelton for a few hours and ascertain what Marietta's dispositions were. In all probability she would prove hostile; yet there was just the chance—with women, and especially with such a woman as she, there are always all manner of chances—that she would set him free. On the occasion of their last interview, indeed, she had rather pointedly given him to understand that he had nothing beyond friendship to expect from her. So he told Lady Maria that he would be only too charmed to avail himself of her very kind hospitality, to which she rejoined briskly:

"That's all right. Then we may as well travel north together. By the way, what is this I see in the papers about more gold having been put into your mines than will ever come out of them?"

Strahan shrugged his shoulders. "Some mines have turned out a failure," he answered; "that was sure to happen. Strictly speaking, they do not belong to us; still we are indirectly liable, and no doubt our shares will have a temporary fall. But there is not the slightest cause for alarm. In fact, if I ever ventured to offer financial advice to my friends, I should tell them that now was their time to buy."

While studiously refraining from offering any such advice to Lady Maria (for in truth he did not think too well of the immediate outlook, and naturally did not wish that the old lady should lose money through him) he nevertheless contrived to set her mind completely at rest; after which he returned to the house and composed a diplomatic reply to Lady Middlewood.

"I wish with all my heart that I could obey your summons," he wrote; "but, alas! I am booked to stay a few days with some other people in the same county when I leave this, and then I am to go, I believe, to Lady Maria Halsted, who has kindly invited me. At Chelton, however, I shall be within reach of you, and perhaps you will allow me to look you up one day. I am sorry to hear of *ennui*, and would gladly believe, if I could, that it might be relieved in ever so small a degree by my society; but unhappily I have nothing fresh to say about the sad subject which I fear is the only one that interests you now. I am sure I need not add that it has by no means ceased to interest me, and I do not even yet despair of ultimately hitting upon some clue to the mystery; but for the moment I am bound to confess that I am as completely baffled as the police."

That was Strahan's idea of a diplomatic missive. But then, as has been said before, he was better qualified to deal with his own than with the other sex, and it did not occur to him that no woman on earth could read those words and doubt his disinclination to respond

to her appeal. At luncheon he found himself again seated beside Betty Mallet, to whom he remarked:

"Your grandmother has been paying me a great compliment. She wants me to go down to Derbyshire with you and spend a short time at Chelton."

Betty's evident surprise showed that this suggestion had not originated with her. "Granny doesn't pay such compliments to everybody," said she. "Are you, by any chance, an authority on matters of ritual? Or is it that you can put her in the way of making investments which combine excitement with profit?"

Strahan did not think that he had won Lady Maria's favour by either of the methods specified. Certainly not by the former: as for the latter, he could only say that if he knew how to make investments at once exciting and profitable he would not now be as poor as he regretted to be.

"Then," observed Betty, "that crafty old thing must have some other motive. I wonder what it can be!"

Her blue eyes, with an amused sparkle in them, met those of her neighbour, who was a little puzzled. His impression (which was not a mistaken one) was that the girl liked him, but whether she had thought of him, or had the smallest idea of accepting him as her future husband was another question. And he did not at all know how to make love to her. The art of making love was one which he had never thought it worth his while to study, nor perhaps could he have attained to proficiency in it, seeing that his was anything but an amorous temperament. Every now and again in the course of his busy life he had been casually fascinated by some woman or other, and had achieved sundry easy victories; he was now, for the first time, genuinely in love with a woman whom every consideration of prudence warned him to avoid, and he had gone the length of telling her so. For Betty Mallet, in spite of her being very pretty, very attractive and capital company, it was out of his power to entertain any such sentiment—which

was unfortunate, since every consideration of prudence urged him to pay court to her. However, he did his best, and was so far successful that she understood perfectly well what he was driving at.

"You don't go to Ludworth, then?" she said, interrogatively.

And he really thought that he was making a rather neat rejoinder when he replied, "How can I—with the alternative of going to Chelton before me?"

It may have been a shrewd estimate of what Mr. Strahan's admiration was worth, or it may have been (as he hoped it was) mere juvenile coquetry that caused Miss Betty from that moment to hold her would-be suitor at arm's length. In any case, his suit made no progress until the change of quarters to Wortley Manor, a neighbouring mansion, brought about, for some reason or other, a change of demeanour on the young lady's part. Round the dinner-table at Wortley Manor there was a fresh set of faces, including one which never had much charm for Strahan, and which, indeed, was apt to assume an unbecoming scowl as often as he looked at it. Mr. and Mrs. Wortley happened to be old friends of St. Quintin's, so that he had every right to be where he was; but that did not prevent Strahan from cursing the pertinacity with which the fellow turned up everywhere; nor did the lady to whom Mr. St. Quintin had been requested to give his arm, show any pleasure at an encounter which she might have—and, in fact, had —anticipated.

"What are you doing down in these parts?" Betty inquired.

"Nothing particular," answered the young man meekly. "I heard that you were to be here this week," he added, leaving her to decide whether or not that statement was to be taken as an explanation.

"We have been paying a lot of visits, and meeting a lot of stupid people," Betty remarked. "I am very glad that we are now on our way home—especially as

Mr. Strahan, who can't be called stupid, is to accompany us."

"Do you mean that he is going to stay with you?" asked St. Quintin, in unconcealed surprise and displeasure.

"If you have no objection. But I notice that you make a point of objecting to all my friends. However, as you won't be in the house with him this time, it doesn't matter."

St. Quintin sighed. "I didn't know that Strahan was a friend of yours," said he.

She took some trouble that evening, and during the next few days, to convince him that she entertained a sincere regard for the gentleman in question. Had he imagined that she was taking trouble in order to do so, he would doubtless have felt somewhat reassured; but, of course, he suspected nothing of the kind. He only saw that Strahan's assiduous attentions were received with every apparent encouragement; and he said to himself that Lady Maria, who was complacently looking on, must have lost her senses. Better a thousand times Charlie Jocelyn than such an unscrupulous miscreant as he believed this man to be!

As, however, no words of his were likely to bring Lady Maria back to her senses, and as he felt that it would be worse than useless to remonstrate with Betty, he was fain to hold his peace while a flirtation which everybody noticed was carried on vigorously under his nose. "I came here for the sake of seeing her," he told himself, "and, having got what I came for, I can't complain. All the same, I wish I hadn't been such an idiot as to imagine that seeing her would make me any happier!"

On the concluding day of his stay Betty, who had scarcely spoken to him all the time, offered him her sympathetic congratulations.

"How glad you will be to get out of this!" she remarked. "I don't know when I have seen any one look so bored. And yet I should have said that we had

been rather a jolly party on the whole. A much jollier one than we shall be at Chelton, anyhow."

"You are not looking forward to that?" asked St. Quintin, with a faint, foolish hope that she was not.

"To entertaining a select circle of aged frumps? Well, no; not exactly. To be sure, there will be Mr. Strahan, which is an unspeakable blessing. But I think you said that you disapproved of our showing any hospitality to Mr. Strahan."

"Excuse me; I never said that. I haven't the right to disapprove of anybody whom you and Lady Maria may delight to honour."

"And if you had that right?"

"Well—then I should exercise it by disapproving of Strahan, I suppose."

"Why?"

This was almost more than St. Quintin could bear. "Do you really wish me to tell you?" he asked.

Betty assured him that she really did; so he drew a long breath and came out bluntly with, "Because I am afraid he wants to marry you."

"Oh," said Betty composedly, "is that it? But there wouldn't be any particular harm in his wanting, would there?"

"There would if he had a chance of getting what he wanted."

"You think, perhaps, that I might do better? Well, I don't know; I have a tarnished reputation, you see."

"For heaven's sake, don't say such things!" exclaimed St. Quintin, aghast.

"I don't make a habit of saying them. To you it doesn't matter what I say; for you are in possession of the melancholy facts, and you can't be more shocked at me than you are already. You don't happen to like Mr. Strahan; but for my own part I don't see why he shouldn't do as well as another. He is clever and a good sportsman and a gentleman. Or would you deny that he is a gentleman?"

St. Quintin felt justified in replying that he would.

"For anything that I know to the contrary, Strahan's parentage may be all right; but his conduct hasn't always been what I should call that of a gentleman. Besides which, I don't believe that he would look twice at you if you were a portionless nobody."

"Many thanks," said Betty, laughing. "Very likely you are right; but then again it is just possible that you may be wrong; and such is my vanity that I quite hope you are."

This terminated the colloquy, and St. Quintin was dismissed with a mournful conviction that the girl whom he loved was bent upon moral suicide.

CHAPTER XLI.

ON THE BRINK.

On a cold, wild and windy afternoon Lady Middlewood sent the carriage which was waiting for her at the door back to the stables and set forth on foot, bound she neither knew nor cared whither. Walking was not much to her taste; but it was upon the whole a shade less dreary than driving, she thought, and time had to be killed somehow. She had her time and her abode all to herself, to do what she liked with; for Lionel had gone off to Newmarket to see a horse of his run in one of the great autumn handicaps, and she had declined an amiable invitation which had reached her by post from Lady Maria Halsted. That same post had brought her a letter from Lady Gosport, which she took out of her pocket, as she wandered across the park, and read for the fourth or fifth time; although only a few of its numerous sentences had any interest for her. That Lady Gosport was arranging a concert for the benefit of distressed Irish ladies, that she wanted it to be a

great success, and that she confidently appealed to her cousin to travel several hundred miles in order to render vócal assistance on the occasion—these were statements which scarcely called for reperusal. They might be answered, and indeed had been answered, by a prompt expression of regret that recent bereavement rendered it quite out of the question for Lady Middlewood to appear upon a public platform. But such remarks as the following were less easily disposed of.

"I really think Aunt Maria must be going off her head! Can you imagine what she means by offering —from what I hear, she literally *is* offering—Betty to that Mr. Strahan; who is a rising man, I dare say, but who has absolutely no position at present, nor any antecedents that can be discovered! I am told that at the Wortleys', where they were staying the other day, everybody expected the engagement to be announced, and now she has asked the man down to Chelton, it seems. I wish you would speak to Lionel about it; he ought, as head of the family, to interfere. Of course I know that Betty was inexcusably foolish last season; but it does not follow that she should be thrown away upon the first nobody who approaches her. I would write to Aunt Maria myself; only there is never the slightest use in my saying anything, and I should only be told to mind my own business. What a dreadful mistake it is to make *any* woman, young or old, independent!"

The independence of Lady Maria was doubtless deplorable; that of Betty Mallet might or might not be so. All would depend upon whether she was or was not enamoured of Roland Strahan, and Marietta derived some comfort from a tolerably strong conviction that she was not. Betty was not at all likely to marry any man without loving him, nor was she the sort of girl to be influenced for a moment by the persuasions of her grandmother. It was, however, quite conceivable that the ambitious Strahan might be tempted to espouse

an attractive and highly connected heiress for whom he entertained no tender passion. That he was being virtually invited to do so appeared almost certain, and even if Lady Gosport had said nothing, Marietta's suspicions would have been aroused by his own announcement of his impending visit to Chelton.

To that announcement she had made no epistolary rejoinder. In her disappointment and vexation she had determined to leave him severely alone, and had gone so far as to say to herself that she would not care a straw if she never saw him again. But it must be assumed that she did care, or that she thought she cared, or at any rate that she could not bear the idea of tamely allowing her captive to be filched from her; for a telegram, containing a curtly worded summons to Ludworth, was even now on its way to Lady Maria's visitor. He was requested to come over to luncheon on the morrow, and was informed that a carriage would be sent to the station to meet him.

"He will have to come," Marietta mused; "it would be hardly possible for him to refuse. I wonder what he will say? I should not like to be in his place; and yet —very likely he won't mind. He is cold enough and material enough to shrug his shoulders and declare that he can't afford to disregard the main chance. Besides, he will have realised that I am powerless—that I can neither betray him nor stoop to reproach him."

She rehearsed a dialogue in which her faithless lover was made to feel exceedingly uncomfortable, and in which she herself made various cutting and contemptuous speeches; but the prospect of dismissing Strahan with his tail between his legs failed, somehow, to satisfy her. The only reflection which did give her some satisfaction was that at least she had never told him that she loved him. She had told herself that she did; but that, perhaps, had not been the truth. She told herself now that she did not, and the assertion availed her so little that tears of mortification came into her eyes.

Now, whatever may have been the condition of her feelings (and it was quite beyond her to unravel them), she was clear upon one point—namely, that she was a most miserable and disenchanted woman. She stood for a time with her back against the trunk of a Scotch fir, and contemplated the wide domain over which she bore joint rule, while the wind roared through the boughs overhead and the homing rooks were blown about like black rags against a pale yellow sky.

"*Che commedia!*" she muttered, thinking of her life and its ironically fulfilled aspirations. Wealth, liberty, a splendid social position and a husband who, to do him justice, was complaisant and pecuniarily generous, if not very ardently affectionate—what more had she ever desired? Assuredly she had not desired or expected more on her wedding day, and that made the bitter taste of all these sweet things the more irritating and perplexing. Bitter or sweet, they were worth nothing to her, and she was ready to resign them all at a word. So, at least, she assured the rooks and the trees, in the absence of a more attentive but less safe confidant. Such a confidant might possibly, on the morrow, speak such a word; in which case——

"In which case," said Marietta, smiling for the first time, "he will not be taken at it. No! it would be madness to trust him, and he does not deserve to be trusted. Still I should like to bring him to his knees once more before I send him away. I want to reject him, not be rejected."

Well, at all events, she had now discovered one thing that she wanted, and on her return to the house she found the anticipated telegram which informed her that her commands would be obeyed.

"Delighted to go to you by the train you mention," was Strahan's message. "So sorry to hear that you won't come to us."

To speak of visiting Lady Maria as "coming to us" was, to say the least of it, rather suggestive. Could the suggestiveness be intentional? A strong suspicion

that it was caused Marietta to furbish up her armour in preparation for the encounter which she foresaw, and enabled her to harden her heart against the respectfully eloquent glances of the gentleman who was duly shown into her presence on the following day. She met those glances of his with a cold and steady stare: if he had any news to impart or to imply, a difficult task should not be rendered easy for him.

But he declined to take the initiative. He discoursed easily and fluently upon commonplace subjects during luncheon, and when the servants had withdrawn he invited his hostess to fire first by asking her point-blank why she had sent for him.

"Because," said he, "I am not vain enough to believe, as I should like to believe, that you merely wished to do an act of kindness to an old friend."

Marietta put forward the anxiety that he knew of as her motive. "You said in your letter that you were as completely baffled as the police; but I can't think that you are really as stupid as they are. Have you been doing anything all this time? Have you been trying to hit upon a clue? It seems so impossible for such a murder to be committed in broad daylight and for the murderer to vanish, without leaving the faintest trace!"

Strahan made a gesture of deprecation. "It does seem impossible," he acknowledged, "and we are as stupid as you like to call us; but—what can I say? I assure you I haven't been idle, and I don't mean to admit that we are beaten yet. At the same time I can't help feeling that each blank day diminishes our chances of ever getting at the truth. My one consolation is that, after all, revenge would not give us back what we have lost."

"Oh, *you* haven't lost anything," said Marietta brusquely; "*you* don't require any consolation. And if you did, you have found it by this time, I imagine."

"You think I have lost nothing?" returned Strahan, looking straight into her eyes. "You think I don't

know what I have lost? Well, you are mistaken. I suppose I ought not to speak about it; but nothing will ever convince me that that fatal afternoon did not rob me of—in short, of all that I care to live for!"

"I did not mean to keep my appointment with you that afternoon," she said quickly.

"Because your father dissuaded you."

"How do you know that?"

"I guessed it; and it seems that I guessed rightly. Oh, and I can guess other things too. Your feelings have changed; after such a shock, and in view of the fact that your poor father had a very natural dislike for me, that is not unnatural. I don't wonder at it, and I don't complain."

"I am sure you don't. You have the best of reasons for being resigned, have you not?"

His request that she would explain herself was granted with promptitude. The conversation was not taking quite the course which Marietta had meant it to take, and she was conscious of losing the self-control which her interlocutor obviously retained; but what was not less obvious to her was that he wanted to make his escape upon the plea that he had been forcibly emancipated, and this she was resolved that he should not do. She charged him in plain language with perfidy; she dared him to deny that he was at Chelton in pursuance of a design upon Betty Mallet's hand and fortune.

"And do you suppose," she asked, in conclusion, "that I shall allow the poor girl to throw herself away upon you when a few words from me will be enough to enlighten her as to what you really are? I don't, for my own part, believe that she will accept you; but if she should, I could hardly remain silent."

Strahan was not frightened. Threats seldom frightened him; besides which, that particular threat, as he perfectly well understood, was unlikely to be carried into effect. On the other hand, his blood was stirred, and his admiration was greatly excited by the warmth with which Marietta expressed herself. If he had doubted

that she loved him, he now doubted no longer; nor did he—for the moment—doubt that her love was worth any price that she might be pleased to set upon it.

"So," said he, with a slight smile, "I am accused of wanting to marry your sister-in-law. Well, why not? It would, of course, be a great match for me, and I see no necessity for a man to be in love with his wife. I do not quite understand what you mean by perfidy. In the first place I have not changed, and shall never change, whatever you may have done; and in the second, it can make no difference to you whether I am married or single. What do you care!"

She murmured something which he did not catch, and which she declined to repeat when begged to do so. Then, all of a sudden—

"Tell me the truth, Marietta!" he exclaimed, "do you care what becomes of me or not? It all rests with you. There is nothing that I wouldn't gladly resign for your sake, nor anything that can be worth having if I am to lose you."

She began a dignified reply to the effect that she cared a good deal what became of Betty, but broke down in the middle of it. She was no longer angry with the man; for his face and his voice had convinced her that he was sincere, and she could not bear to give him up. So she faltered; and he was not slow to take advantage of her weakness. His arms were round her before she could stop him, her head fell forward upon his shoulder, and he was kissing her as Lionel had never kissed her yet. For an instant she rejoiced in the surrender which was scarcely distinguishable from a triumph; but only for an instant. In a swift revulsion of feeling she repelled him, gasping out:

"Oh, I can't!—I am not as bad as you think I am —I can't live with one man and love another. We must never meet again after this."

"Unless we meet never to part again," Strahan returned. "I also am not as bad as you think I am; I know how you feel, and I have looked the inevitable

consequences of our love in the face. For you it must mean the loss of title, fortune, and character; for me the abandonment of my present office, salary, and career. It is a heavy penalty; but am ready to take my share of it. Are you ready to take yours, and begin life over again with me on the other side of the world?"

She shivered and sighed. The man frightened her with his cool, relentless common sense, which had an effect of mockery, although he was so evidently in earnest. She began to make feeble excuses for herself. Her husband did not love her; she had no friends; she was so miserably lonely! It was wicked, perhaps, to love a man who was not her husband; but things happen to one over which one has no control. At least, however, she would refrain from ruining the man whom she loved.

"You can't ruin me," Strahan declared, with a smile. "I am capable of making a fortune in Australia, happen what may, and I mean to make one. The question is whether you are willing to give up as much as I am."

"There is Bob," she objected faintly.

He nodded. "Well, yes; I didn't mention the child, though I didn't forget him. It has to be all or nothing, Marietta. Which is it to be?"

He had found it a hard matter to say truthfully which he wished it to be; but he had a gambler's exultation in staking his whole future upon the hazard of a woman's decision, and he awaited her reply with a composed countenance.

Her reply, when it came, was a plea for time. She had been completely taken by surprise, she said; it was necessary for her to think things over quietly and make up her mind, if possible, to a step which, when once taken, must of course be irrevocable. "It is not as if I had only myself to consider. That is *your* case; mine is much more complicated."

"In other words," observed Strahan, "you care for

me a little, but not quite enough to disregard everybody and everything else."

"Perhaps that is so; I don't know."

"And how long am I to wait for your answer?"

"I don't know," answered Marietta again.

"That is scarcely fair. Suppose I get 'No' for an answer some weeks hence?"

"You are at liberty to propose to Betty in the meantime, if you choose," replied Marietta, her lips curving themselves into a smile; for she felt very sure that he would not do that.

He returned gravely. "So be it. I am not bound, nor are you. But I hope, for many reasons, that you will not keep me waiting long. Most likely Middlewood will ask me to come on here from Chelton. I am not over squeamish; still I would a little rather not accept hospitality from him again. Do you understand?"

She made a sign of assent, and asked at what hour his train left. "You won't mind my saying that I should like you to go away now," she added. "I can't —it is impossible——"

"I suppose it is," Strahan agreed. "Well, if I walk to the station and walk slowly, I shall not have very long to wait on the platform. May I write?"

"No, please. I will write to you soon—as soon as I can. I must ring and tell them that you won't want a carriage."

By means of this stratagem she was enabled to take leave of her visitor with a formal shake of the hand in the presence of the butler—a small assertion of independence on her part which he did not grudge her, seeing that it was in all human probability the last that she would ever attempt with him.

But what about his own independence, which he had virtually surrendered? What about his vanished ambitions and his ruined career? Roland Strahan was not the man to take such a step as he now contemplated without a distinct comprehension of what it must imply, and while he wended his deliberate way

towards the station he apostrophised his conduct in language more terse than complimentary. Nevertheless, he did not exactly repent. He was going to repent, he knew; he was as certain to do that as a man who has indulged too freely in strong drink is to become sober and sorry. But not at once—not, perhaps, for a longish time to come.

"Moreover," said he to himself, with a half laugh, "I am not across the Rubicon yet, and it remains upon the cards that I shall not be asked or allowed to make the crossing."

CHAPTER XLII.

NOT CAUGHT YET.

STRAHAN, whose mental vision was unclouded and who was under no illusion as to his feelings, actual or prospective, foresaw that he was bound, sooner or later, to tire of the woman whom he loved. Marietta, though much less clear as to what she wanted or expected, perceived, nevertheless, that she had made what might prove to be a terrible mistake, and after her lover had left her, she spent a long time in vainly wishing that she had not sent for him. She had not, to be sure, promised to run away with him; she remained, in a manner of speaking, free; but she had confessed her love, and—she had allowed the man to kiss her. She shuddered slightly at the recollection, which surely would not have been so distasteful to her if she had really loved the subject of her perplexed meditations.

"Whether I go to him or not," she thought, "I can never undo what has been done; and even if nobody else ever knows, *he* will always know that I have disgraced myself!"

The poor woman, it will be observed, scarcely knew

her world, and some readers who have hitherto entertained a low opinion of her may now, in view of the extreme severity with which she judged herself, be willing to throw her a crumb of amused pity. Nobody, of course, can be expected to sympathise with her; for her nature was so queer and so ill-regulated that she was quite incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong—which is simply unheard of.

She could, however, distinguish between what was expedient and what was inexpedient (according to certain philosophers, that is another way of saying the same thing), and expediency obviously enjoined upon her to remain where she was. Only then Strahan would marry Betty Mallet. Or, in the event of his being refused by Betty, he would marry somebody else—perhaps love somebody else. Besides, Lionel would escape the punishment which was his due. She had persuaded herself that Lionel's good-natured indifference merited punishment, finding in that reflection her own chief excuse. It was only when she pictured to herself the divorced Lionel contracting a second and a happier alliance that she almost resolved to send Strahan about his business.

Thus through the night and the whole of the ensuing day she wavered and doubted, striving without success to solve a problem which was in truth one of elementary simplicity. Setting aside religious principle and domestic affection—as she had practically done from the outset—the only question for her to consider was whether she loved Strahan enough to resign a coronet and a big income for his sake; but matters struck her as being a good deal more complicated than that. Bob was made the recipient of abrupt and unwonted caresses, which he appeared to find a little disconcerting; the carriage was twice ordered and twice sent away; finally, a telegram was despatched to Lionel at Newmarket, requesting him to return as soon as he conveniently could.

Now when, in prompt obedience to this summons,

his lordship arrived, his first words naturally enough, were an inquiry what was the matter; and, on being told that nothing was the matter, he not less naturally exclaimed, "Then why the deuce—but never mind! I suppose you did want me for something?"

"I did not want to put you to any inconvenience," Marietta replied; "I particularly said that you were only to come back as soon as you conveniently could."

"Yes; but one hardly knew what that meant. Is the boy all right?"

"Perfectly right. I am sorry to have brought you home in such a hurry and against your will."

"Oh, that's of no consequence," answered Lionel, who had been done out of a rather interesting day's racing and had had something of a fright into the bargain; "only I don't quite understand yet why you telegraphed."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I was lonely," she said. "In order to know what loneliness really means one should spend a short time in a house of this size, surrounded by a swarm of silent servants."

"I am very sorry; I shouldn't have gone away if I hadn't thought that you wished to be left alone. But I didn't think that could have been your only reason; there was something else, surely."

"Was there? Well, perhaps there was. Nothing of much importance though. Mr. Strahan came over from Chelton the other day and lunched with me."

"Did he? I hope you asked him to transfer himself here as soon as he had finished his visit to granny."

"No; I didn't do that; I fancy that his visit to Lady Maria may last rather a long time. That was what I wanted to say to you. You wouldn't very much like him to be your brother-in-law, would you?"

"No," answered Lionel decisively, "I shouldn't. Not that I have any power to prevent Betty from pleasing herself; but I confess that I would rather not see her married to Strahan. Do you mean that there is a chance of her doing anything so foolish?"

Marietta read extracts from Lady Gosport's letter and implied, though she did not actually say, that Strahan had admitted his intentions. It had been with no such motive in her mind that she had called her husband away from Newmarket; but that impulsive telegram had to be accounted for somehow, and it occurred to her that she might at once divert possible suspicion from herself and place an incidental spoke in Strahan's wheel by giving information to the head of the family.

The head of the family, however, did not, upon reflection, see his way to interfere. He remarked very sensibly that more human harm than good was likely to result from the issue of orders or prohibitions which could not be enforced. "If I know anything of Betty," he added, "she will do just exactly what she wants to do, with my approval or without it, and I doubt very much whether she wants to marry Strahan. I could understand his wanting to marry her—though he has never breathed a word to me upon the subject—and it isn't impossible that opposition might drive her to accept him. But if she is left alone, I quite hope and believe that she will send him flying. Anyhow, it isn't a question to deal with by letter, and I can't manage to see her just at present, because I have got to go up to London, unfortunately, in a day or two."

"For long?" asked Marietta, in somewhat dismayed accents.

"No; only for about a week, I think. I am very sorry to be obliged to leave you again so soon; but it can't very well be helped. When your telegram arrived, I was upon the point of writing to ask whether you would care to come up with me. I suppose you wouldn't?"

"I would rather go anywhere on earth than spend another week here all by myself!" exclaimed Marietta, with unexpected vehemence. "But perhaps," she went on, "you would not care to be bothered with me. Perhaps I should be in your way."

To be jealous of a husband whom you contemplate abandoning is doubtless illogical; but Lady Middlewood's sentiments were not trammelled by the hard and fast rules of logic, nor was she disposed to acquiesce tamely in a departure for which no pretext had been vouchsafed to her. Many smart ladies frequent Newmarket at certain seasons of the year, and why should not one of them have made an appointment with a good-looking young nobleman whose melancholy and discontented wife chose to leave him to his own devices? But there was no suggestion of conscious guilt in Lionel's honest eyes, and it was impossible to doubt that he was speaking the truth when he replied:

"You could never be in my way, Marietta; I should like to have you always with me, if I could. Surely you must know that."

"You don't always behave as if you wished to have me with you," she remarked, letting her eyelids drop.

"Don't I? I suppose that is because I am afraid of being a bore—or rather because I know that I often *am* a bore."

"Ah, that is such an easy way of putting yourself in the right!"

"It's true, at all events, and I didn't say it to make you appear in the wrong. But——" He paused for a moment, coloured slightly, and resumed: "I'm such an awfully bad hand at expressing myself! Only I want you to know, once for all, Marietta, that I am just what I was on our wedding day. It's inevitable, I dare say, that time should seem to make a difference; but it doesn't really, and—and when you want me, you'll find me in the old place; I haven't budged, and I never shall. There!—now I'll stop being sentimental and go round to the stables. I hear the chestnut mare has been coughing again."

Feeling a little foolish, and being in rather a hurry to get out of the room, he did not notice the tears which were running down his wife's cheeks. It was perhaps as well that he did not notice them; for she was in a con-

dition so nearly hysterical that it would not have taken much to draw from her an avowal which might easily have had disastrous consequences. Meanwhile, those few kindly, embarrassed words of Lionel's almost had the effect of making her resolve to steer clear of disaster. She resolved, at all events, to leave for London without sending any intimation of her intentions to Chelton, and it was with some inward satisfaction that she imagined the long face which Strahan would pull on hearing that she had gone.

So Lord and Lady Middlewood betook themselves to Arlington-street together and were, after a fashion, reconciled, although they had not quarrelled. Such temporary reconciliations are not uncommon between estranged husbands and wives, and as a rule they only serve to emphasise the mute resumption of hostilities which is sure to follow. Marietta, however, was for the time being pleased with Lionel, while he, noting an improvement in her spirits, did all that he could to foster it. They went to a couple of theatres together, and enjoyed themselves, and if they were not precisely affectionate, they were at least better friends than they had been for some months past.

But a letter which was brought up to Marietta's room with her breakfast after a day or two, reminded her somewhat peremptorily that she was not at liberty to postpone indefinitely the fulfilment of a certain pledge.

"If you will tell me nothing else," Strahan wrote, "tell me at any rate what this means. When I saw you, you were not thinking of leaving home. Why have you left?—and how soon may I expect to hear from you? It seems to me that I have a right to ask."

"I am only in London for a week's shopping," was her reply. "Of course I will tell you as soon as I can all that you may wish to be told; but I don't quite understand your saying that you have a 'right' to ask

questions. I am still free, and so are you. Please, burn this at once, and don't write again. I shall be back at Ludworth, in a few days, I believe."

She was in no desperate hurry to return to Ludworth. It was quite true that she was busily engaged in shopping, and the ordering and trying on of new clothes was an employment which never failed to bring satisfaction to her soul. Several other ladies of her acquaintance were in London on a similar errand and were glad to take tea with her and compare notes after the fatigues of the day. It was not, of course, a very exciting method of passing the time; but it had attractions for her which were enhanced by the thought that this was perhaps her last experience of them. Not without a regretful pang can the power to spend money lavishly be renounced by any human being, male or female.

Lionel dined at home every day and sometimes lunched. During the intervening hours he was claimed, it appeared, chiefly by lawyers and horse-dealers. Of course he also had friends to look up; but they were friends of his own sex, to whom no exception could be taken and whom he brought back with him occasionally to share an informal meal. Amongst these, one evening, was St. Quintin, and so noticeable were that young man's silence and dejection that even the hostile Marietta could not help feeling a little sorry for him.

"Is anything the matter with you?" she asked during dinner, while Lionel was engrossed in discussing equine genealogy with a famous owner of thoroughbred stock. "You neither eat nor drink, and you look so forbidding that one hardly dares to speak to you."

"I beg your pardon," said St. Quintin, rousing himself out of a dismal reverie; "I am afraid I am even more dull and stupid than usual. The fact is that I have been working rather hard since my holiday came to an end, and one's work isn't always satisfactory."

"Nor one's holidays either," Marietta remarked.

"Well, no; very often they are not. It's an unsatisfactory world, Lady Middlewood, for most of us. Not for you, though."

"How can you possibly tell?" returned Marietta. "Many people would be glad to change places with me, no doubt, and hundreds would think themselves lucky to be private secretary to a Cabinet Minister, as you are. What does that prove?"

St. Quintin was fain to admit that it did not prove much; but pressure on his neighbour's part failed to extract from him more specific admissions. Not to her had he any intention of confessing the sources of his dissatisfaction with mundane affairs. To Lionel, however, he did subsequently venture upon a partial acknowledgment of the truth. He and his friend were smoking their post-prandial cigarettes alone, the racing man having hurried away to keep an appointment elsewhere, and, in reply to a remark of Lionel's, St. Quintin said:

"Yes, I dare say I look worried; Lady Middlewood has been telling me that I do. How is one to avoid being worried by—by things in general? One thing which ought to worry you, though it doesn't seem to do so, is this affair between your sister and Strahan."

"My dear fellow, there is no affair that I know of. Marietta pretends that there is; but even if she is right—which I doubt—will you tell me what I can do? For any power or authority that I possess, Betty may marry a crossing-sweeper to-morrow."

"You know very well that you would not allow her to marry a crossing-sweeper. You exerted your authority promptly enough in the case of Lord Charles Jocelyn, who is an angel from Heaven by comparison with Strahan."

"Ah, that's where you and I differ. I don't say that I am exactly eager to welcome Strahan into the family——"

"Good Lord!" interjected St. Quintin, "I should think not!"

"No; but for all that, I should greatly prefer him to a useless, self-indulgent beggar like Charlie Jocelyn. Strahan, at all events, is a man, and I must say that I have always found him a very honest and straightforward man."

"H'm!"

"Oh, I know you don't think so; but aren't you just a little bit prejudiced? You never did like Strahan even in the old days, and latterly——"

"Don't laugh!" interrupted St. Quintin; "it isn't a laughing matter. You have guessed, I see, what a lunatic I am; but, hang it all! don't trample upon a poor devil who would be as sane as you are if he only could."

"My dear old man," Lionel made haste to reply, "I am not laughing. I really didn't know—granny said something; but one never pays much attention to what she says, and if you mean that Betty has refused you, she has refused one of the best fellows in England. I am very sorry for it."

"She hasn't had the chance of refusing me," St. Quintin returned. "Did you imagine that I had had the impudence to offer myself to her?"

"Well, you seem to think that Strahan has had that impudence—or is going to have it. Considering that your blood is at least as good as ours, I confess I don't quite see where the impudence comes in."

St. Quintin stretched out his big, bony hand to grip that of his friend. "Thanks," said he; "it is generous of you to speak like that; although—of course we have come down in the world, while you and yours have risen a long way above us. But she wouldn't have looked at me if I had been a duke. There's no use in thinking about that; only there may be some use in trying to preserve her from Strahan's clutches."

"Well, I can tell her that in my opinion Strahan is so far from being her equal by birth that she ought to look upon him as impossible. That really is my opinion; though it is the sort of thing that one doesn't

particularly like saying. But I don't for one moment believe that she will listen to me. That is, if she cares for the man."

"But you might say rather more than that, I think. You might truthfully say that he is an arrant scoundrel."

"No, old man; I couldn't say that. In the first place, it isn't what I think, and in the second, I should naturally be asked to prove my accusation. Where are the proofs?"

Where indeed? St. Quintin could only sigh and hark back to the old story of Maggie Field's suicide, which certainly—so far as the facts were known—did not prove Strahan to be a scoundrel. Any reference to his behaviour towards Marietta or his possible complicity in the murder of Colonel Vigne was, of course, out of the question, and soon afterwards St. Quintin left Arlington-street with a heavy heart. There was nothing more to be said, nor anything more to be done, he told himself.

Turning the corner into St. James's-street, he ran against a shabby-looking loafer, to whom he made a hasty apology. But the loafer, instead of getting out of the way, stretched forth a tremulous, detaining hand, and said hoarsely:

"Mr. St. Quintin, I—I—don't you know me?"

He turned down his coat-collar and drew a little nearer to a gas lamp, by the light of which St. Quintin scrutinising him exclaimed:

"Good Heavens! it's—surely it isn't—Brydon?"

"All that's left of him," replied the other with a short laugh—"and that's devilish little, I can tell you! I don't suppose any poor wretch since the world began has had such luck as I have had!"

"I never believed that you were guilty in that business, you know," said St. Quintin.

"You didn't? Well, it's a fact that I wasn't guilty, and only a short time ago I could have proved my innocence. Now, by the most extraordinary mischance, I

can prove nothing at all; for who would be likely to take my word?"

"I should," answered St. Quintin quickly. "I would take your word rather than Strahan's any day."

Brydon's trembling fingers were raised irresolutely to his mouth. "Look here," he whispered; "if I tell you something, will you swear not to get me into trouble? I'm as innocent as a baby, and I'm sure I don't hold much to life; still I don't want to be hung, you know. Damn it all! a man don't want to be hung."

"There isn't the faintest possibility of that," St. Quintin declared, thinking only of Maggie Field's death; "don't talk such nonsense. Well, what have you to tell me?"

"Oh, I can't tell you here; it's so infernally cold, and I must have a drink first. Do you think we could get a room to ourselves at some public?"

"Come home with me," said St. Quintin, "and I'll give you some hot whiskey and water, if that will do."

Brydon's eyes glistened. "Thank you," he answered; "that will do first-rate!" He added, in forlorn, whimpering accents, as if the idea had just occurred to him, "I believe I'm hungry too."

CHAPTER XLIII.

DUTCH COURAGE.

A COLD pigeon pie was discovered in St. Quintin's rooms, upon which his out-of-elbows visitor fell wolfishly. Unstinted grog completed the restorative process, and at the end of a quarter of an hour Brydon, after fetching a long sigh of contentment, declared himself ready to proceed to business.

"Mr. St. Quintin," he began, "has it ever occurred to you to wonder who killed Colonel Vigne?"

"Ever occurred to me to wonder!" exclaimed St. Quintin impatiently. "Why, God bless my soul! we have been moving heaven and earth for months past to discover the murderer, and so far we have discovered nothing at all. Are you going to tell me that you know him?"

Brydon nodded solemnly and emphatically. "I was present on the occasion, and I saw the fatal blow struck," he replied.

"The devil you did! Then why, in the name of wonder, have you held your tongue all this time?"

"That I will explain presently. What I wish to say first, and what I dare say you will not be sorry to hear, is that Strahan was the assassin. I was concealed in the brushwood hard by when he met Colonel Vigne and when an altercation took place between them. It was the poor old gentleman's own fault, one may say; he should never have attacked a man so much younger and stronger than himself. Besides, thanks to my imprudence, he had letters of which it was simply essential that Strahan should get possession, and he was foolish enough to produce them. I assure you it was all I could do to keep still when he acted in that insane way —because the letters were *my* property; they hadn't been paid for, worse luck! I foresaw that they would be snatched away from him, and of course they were. Then he must needs fly at Strahan's throat, and he dropped his stick, which was immediately made use of to break his head. In all my life I have never felt more miserable or more disgusted! It was the stupidest——"

"You saw all this?" interrupted St. Quintin; "you are prepared to swear that you saw it?"

"To you I am; I don't know about facing cross-examination in a court of law. That fellow has the devil's own ingenuity; it wouldn't be difficult for him to throw suspicion upon me."

"Well," observed St. Quintin, "I can understand

that twelve average Englishmen might find it hard to believe that any man could look on at a cold-blooded murder and never raise a finger to help the victim."

Brydon began to whimper. "Oh, if you're going to take up that tone!"

St. Quintin realised that he had better not take up that tone, and repressed a strong desire to kick his informant. "No doubt," said he, "you have some explanation to give of what at present looks inexplicable. What were these letters of which you speak? So far, you haven't cleared up the mystery at all."

"You haven't given me time," returned the other, in injured accents. "I'll tell you all about it, if you will kindly have a little patience; but please don't jump down my throat like that again; my health won't stand it."

He received as civil an apology as St. Quintin could bring himself to utter, and proceeded to narrate the tale with which he had once gladdened Colonel Vigne's ears, adding an account of the circumstances under which he had placed valuable and irreplaceable documents in the hands of that too impetuous warrior.

"I ought not to have parted with them before getting the money," he confessed ruefully; "I shall never cease to regret having done so. But the Colonel represented to me that it was of great importance to him to have them at once, and naturally he hadn't £350 in his pocket. He gave me an I. O. U. for the amount, and promised to pay within a week. How could I foresee that he would go and get himself killed and robbed by the man who he had it in his power to crush?"

"It must have been very disappointing for you," said St. Quintin grimly.

"It was heartbreaking, sir! I don't believe such a thing could have happened to any living being but me! And I was utterly helpless."

"So it appears. May I ask what you did after you had quietly looked on at a cowardly crime?"

"Oh, I stole away as noiselessly as I could, and as

soon as I was out of the copse I ran for my life. I don't know what you call looking on quietly, Mr. St. Quintin; you must remember that there wouldn't have been an atom of use in my attempting to interfere. Just look at me!" he added, holding out his shaking hands; "am I the sort of man to take part in a fray?"

St. Quintin grunted. "Not with much effect, I suppose; still I wonder at your not having tried, and I wonder even more that you didn't at once give information to the police. Why on earth didn't you?"

"Because I was afraid. You don't understand that; but then you don't know what it is to be totally demoralised. Suppose I had rushed out and tried to back up the Colonel—what would have happened? Why, simply that Strahan would have killed me into the bargain."

"I think not," said St. Quintin; "he certainly would not have wished to have two corpses to account for. However, we'll assume, if you like, that your anxiety to keep a whole skin justified you in taking to your heels. All the same, I don't see your motive for flying the neighbourhood. Probably you were the mysterious Brown for whom we sought high and low without success?"

Brydon signified assent. "I have told you," he said, "that I was, and am, a demoralised being. You, of course, wouldn't have run away, and most people wouldn't have run away. But I did, because, for one thing, I am a coward, and because, for another, I knew that that man's infernal ingenuity was quite equal to putting a halter round my neck. I should have told my story and he would have told his—which of us, do you think, would have been believed? The letters were in his hands—he lost no time in burning them, you may be sure—and I hadn't another particle of evidence. So I considered it best to make myself scarce, and as I had a little money left out of the trifle which Colonel Vigne had paid me on account, I——"

"Spent it on drink?" suggested St. Quintin.

"Just so. I spent every blessed penny of it in that

way, except what my bill at the inn and a third class ticket to Manchester cost me. I was so sickened and disheartened that I wanted to drink myself to death; but the benevolence of the public won't allow useless members of the community to snuff themselves out nowadays. I was picked up I don't know where and taken to the hospital, where I had a bad bout of the terrors. By the time that I was discharged, nominally cured, the police were off my track, I believe; but it wouldn't have been safe to linger in that part of the world, I made my way up to London, and here I have been ever since—thinking things over."

"And wishing, no doubt, that you hadn't been such a fool."

"Well, I have been wishing very much to be even with Strahan. But for that, I shouldn't have been lying in wait for you or Lord Middlewood so long, and I certainly shouldn't have made the statement which you have just heard. It has no support beyond my bare assertion, you see."

"You haven't a scrap of documentary evidence?"

"Absolutely none; that's the cruel part of it! Those letters would have been worth anything; but we may take it as certain that they have been destroyed. I'll tell you what I *have* got, though it isn't exactly documentary evidence, and that is Colonel Vigne's I. O. U. for the balance of the sum which he agreed to pay me. Here it is for you to look at. I have complete confidence in your honour, Mr. St. Quintin, you see; I don't mind letting this bit of paper out of my hands, in spite of my atrocious experiences."

Brydon had been replenishing his glass at intervals during the above conversation; it was evident that he was now in a condition to bestow the honour of his confidence upon anybody. St. Quintin, with a side-glance at the man's flushed cheeks, pushed away the whiskey decanter and examined the dirty fragment of paper held out to him. Upon it was inscribed in pencil a promise, signed by Colonel Vigne, to pay to George

Brydon the sum of £344 16*s.* 6*d.*, being the amount due, in excess of that already paid, for certain letters, addressed by Mr. Roland Strahan to the late Maggie Field and delivered by the aforesaid George Brydon to the subscriber.

"This," observed St. Quintin, "is undoubtedly documentary evidence, and I should say that it might prove to be of great importance. It supplies a motive for the murder, and it also, I presume, explains your presence at the time when the murder was committed. You went to the copse, I take it, to claim your money."

"Well, no; the time wasn't up yet, you see. But that's neither here nor there. If you want to know what took me to the copse, I don't mind telling you. I went there because I rather expected Strahan and Lady Middlewood to meet by chance in that place. They had met by chance near there on the previous day, and I had overheard something of what passed between them. So I thought there would be no harm in my hearing or seeing a little more."

Brydon accompanied this information with a grin and a vinous wink, which won him no additional favour in the eyes of his interlocutor.

"You mean, perhaps," said the latter, "that you were in hopes of being able to levy blackmail upon Lady Middlewood, as well as Colonel Vigne?"

"Come now, Mr. St. Quintin, you can't say that the very trifling sum which was all that Colonel Vigne would agree to pay me came under the head of blackmail. Strahan, I make no doubt, would have paid me twice or three times as much for those letters; but I was willing to sacrifice my own interests for the sake of seeing justice done. As for Lady Middlewood, she wouldn't have found me extortionate. I would have been as silent as the grave for——"

"Oh, that will do!" interrupted St. Quintin, whose patience was exhausted. "It makes no difference to me or to the matter in hand what your dirty schemes may have been; but please understand this: if you

breathe one wood before the magistrates or elsewhere against Lady Middlewood's character, I shall be under the necessity of giving you such a hiding as you won't forget in a hurry. You neither saw nor heard anything that could possibly compromise her, and that you are prepared to swear. Do you see?"

"Now you're beginning to bully again!" exclaimed Brydon plaintively. "It's rather bad form of you, I must say, considering that my last illness has left me as weak as an infant, and that I never at any time was a fighting man. I'm sure I don't want to cast any reflection upon Lady Middlewood's character; as you say, her character hasn't much to do with the matter in hand. But when you talk about going before the magistrates, you advance a little bit too quickly—you do really! I haven't promised yet to go before any magistrates."

"I imagine that you would, if it were made worth your while," said St. Quintin.

"Well, really, when you come to think of it—haven't I a right to expect that it should be made worth my while? I put it to you as a gentleman and a man of the world—isn't it only fair that some compensation should be made to me for the losses that I have sustained and the risk that I am expected to run?"

"I dare say it is," answered St. Quintin curtly. "Anyhow, I believe I may undertake to promise that you shall be compensated."

"Thank you. To what extent, I wonder?—just in round numbers."

"How can I possibly tell you? Perhaps you had better name a sum. I myself am not a rich man; but I'll do what I can, and Middlewood, who is rich, has already offered a reward of £1,000, I believe, to anybody who will give information leading to a conviction of the murderer. Would double that amount satisfy you?"

Brydon's eyes glittered; but he thought it due to himself to point out that £2,000 was very far from cov-

ering the loss that he had incurred through Strahan's perfidious conduct. "That man has ruined me, body and soul!" he cried. "But for him, I might at this moment be the prosperous and respected incumbent of a good living."

"Oh, excuse me," said St. Quintin; "I can't think that under any circumstances you would have been respected. Prosperous of course you might have been, if you had taken the pledge; only that doesn't happen to be any business of ours. We don't propose to take over Strahan's liabilities; we merely offer—at least, I suppose I may say that Middlewood and I offer—to pay you for giving the evidence that you can give."

"And to protect me from the possible consequences of giving evidence?"

"Well, I hardly know what you mean by that."

"Prosecution for perjury, my dear sir—or even being placed upon my trial for murder. You must bear in mind that this will be simply a case of hard swearing, one side against the other, and that scoundrel is quite capable of turning the tables against me. There is that I. O. U. of Colonel Vigne's, to be sure; but it won't prove that I am speaking the truth, and it will certainly tell against me that I ran away, whereas Strahan stood his ground. All these things have to be considered."

St. Quintin shrugged his shoulders. He did not see how he, or Lionel, or anybody else could protect the informer against the danger alluded to; but he expressed his personal conviction that it was an imaginary one. "Anyhow," he added, "it can't be shirked now. The best plan will be for you to go round to Scotland Yard with me to-morrow morning, and make your statement. Then we shall be told what step to take next."

But the mere mention of Scotland Yard caused Brydon (who had made several ineffectual grabs at the whiskey decanter, which was beyond his reach) to shiver from head to foot. He was not going to put himself

in the power of the police, he declared; he ought not to be asked or expected to do such a thing. "Why, you yourself said that it would be difficult to convince an average jury of the truth of my story."

"Well, I hadn't heard the whole story when I said that. I think now that your motives may be made comprehensible, and I certainly don't think that you have anything to fear from the police. Besides, I can't conceive what alternative course you would suggest."

"To begin with, I would suggest consulting Lord Middlewood," said Brydon.

For a moment St. Quintin was inclined to agree; but he reflected that Lionel, who liked Strahan and hated a coward, would probably prove sceptical, and also that he might inform his wife, who could not be relied upon to abstain from conveying information to the accused. So he shook his head and said:

"Better not! You don't want Strahan to escape, I suppose, and what you said just now about him and Lady Middlewood—though there isn't the slightest foundation for your suspicions—shows that you are aware of their being upon terms of intimacy."

"You think the lady would give him the tip to bolt, eh?"

"I'm sure I don't know; but what everybody knows is that the fewer people who are admitted into a secret the better chance there is of its being kept. Come, Brydon, you were a—a decent enough sort of fellow once upon a time, I dare say; pluck up your courage, and I'll see you through!"

"I haven't got any courage," answered the miserable man.

"Then find some!" returned St. Quintin impatiently, and pushed the decanter towards him.

If courage was not discoverable there, something which answered the purpose almost as well was, and half an hour later the rather unpleasant privilege of putting his disreputable visitor to bed devolved upon St. Quintin.

"It wouldn't have done to let the fellow go away," he mused; "the chances are that I should never have set eyes upon him again. And a pretty sort of witness he will be, at the best! All the same, I don't see how they can get past his evidence. The only question is whether I shall be able to drag him to Scotland Yard in the morning."

This turned out to be an easier matter than might have been anticipated. Brydon awoke, frightened and partially stupefied; yet resigned, as he had been all his life long, to the dictates of a will stronger than his own. He said little, signified his willingness to do as he was told, and shortly after breakfast was marched off towards his appointed destination, arm in arm with the triumphant St. Quintin.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE PHILOSOPHIC LOSER.

"I HOPE," said Lady Maria Halsted very amiably, "that you will stay as long as you can put up with our dull society and our jog-trot way of life. The longer the better, so far as Betty and I are concerned, I'm sure! We are only too charmed to have you."

This gratifying assurance was conveyed to Mr. Strahan one morning after breakfast, when he had requested an audience of his venerable hostess for the purpose of asking whether he might trespass upon her hospitality until the end of the week. Lady Maria, who received him in the cosy little sitting-room upstairs where she always breakfasted, was of opinion that his request implied rather more than was apparent upon the face of it, and was quite ready to bestow her blessing upon him. Betty must marry somebody, and she was possessed by an altogether erroneous idea that eligible

young men would now prove rather shy of offering marriage to Betty. So she smiled and nodded her old head knowingly, adding, "If you don't believe me ask my granddaughter."

Strahan said what the occasion required and withdrew. He was not disinclined to take the advice offered to him; only it was necessary that he should hold counsel with himself and carefully consider his position before doing so. The latter had been altered, or at all events rendered susceptible of alteration, by certain communications which that morning's post had brought to him. The company's affairs were not, and had not for some time past been prospering; it was suspected that there had been a good deal of mismanagement, and the directors thought it very desirable that the interests of the shareholders should be looked after on the spot by a thoroughly efficient man. The duties which Strahan had hitherto been discharging in London might, they considered, be safely delegated to somebody else; but they knew of no one so admirably qualified as he to proceed to the Antipodes and assume control of affairs there. He was offered a considerable increase of salary, and was given to understand that, in the event of his accepting this proposition, he would be expected to take up his permanent residence in Australia.

Now, the above intimation obviously opened out fresh prospects and possibilities. Strahan believed himself to be almost indispensable, and his directors seemed to share that belief. Consequently, it might be assumed that so long as he continued to serve them well—and especially if his services should be performed on the other side of the globe—they would not deem it their business to inquire too closely into any little private irregularities of which he might be guilty. In other words, the majority of them would probably be very much shocked by such a scandal as Lady Middlewood's elopement, but would prefer to prove how scandalised they were by some other method than by the sacrifice

of large sums of money. There would be a row, no doubt, and Lionel would most likely resign his directorship; but the delinquent would hardly be punished by dismissal.

"It makes a difference," Strahan mused; "one may almost say that it makes all the difference. For whatever Marietta may think, she is not the woman to stand roughing it, and I—well, I suppose I am not the man to stand living very long with a discontented woman."

He was not the man to stand living very long with any woman; and of this he was, at moments, fully aware. But there were other moments—there had been many such of late—when he felt that existence without one woman in particular would be intolerable, and that she must at any cost be his. His ardour had been naturally stimulated by Marietta's hasty flight to London and by her curt reply to his letter; for the significance of her conduct was not lost upon him. Evidently, she would throw him over, if she could persuade herself to do so; she was even now trying hard to throw him over; and of course the more she thought about it all the more like she was to succeed.

"Well," resumed the cogitator, "she makes a point of it that we are both free, and, that being so, I am entitled to take the initiative, if I please. I may reject her, instead of being rejected by her—and a colossal fool I shall be if I don't! To think that one should hesitate for an instant! I decline to leave the country; I retain my secretaryship for a time; I marry a charming young lady of great wealth; by and by I enter Parliament; I have all the excitement of being an active politician and all the fun that is to be had from unlimited sport—why, it's downright criminal to turn one's back upon such a prospect!"

That was indeed a very accurate expression of his sentiments with regard to the matter. He loved Marietta; yet it was doubtful whether he would ever be able to forgive himself for throwing away such a chance as falls to the lot of only a very few mortals. He scrib-

bled off a telegram to London saying, that in the course of a day or two a definite reply should be returned to the suggestion which he had received: then he walked to the bay-window of the library, where he had been sitting, and looked out upon the broad acres which must in the natural course of things be Betty's property ere long.

The weather had turned cold, the sky was low and gray, a gusty wind was driving the fallen leaves across the park and ruffling the surface of the lake. But in that sheltered basin of the hills things never looked so gloomy as they did, for example, at Middlewood, nor was it possible to survey the Chelton estate without thinking how very nice it would be to reside upon it as its virtual master.

Strahan was idly wondering whether there would be much difficulty in getting Betty Mallet to acknowledge a virtual master, when she swept on a sudden within the range of his vision. She was exercising a young horse over the grass—he remembered that she had mentioned her intention of doing so—and he was moved, not for the first time, to genuine admiration for her workmanlike ability. Betty never looked to greater advantage than she did in the saddle. She had that indescribable air of being perfectly comfortable and at home there which many notable horsemen and horsewomen fall short of acquiring, and she appeared to be enjoying herself although the gambols of her high-spirited mount had caused her to lose her hat.

Strahan thought that the least he could do was to go and pick it up for her; the utmost that he could do would not, unluckily, enable him to fall in love with her—which was really ridiculous. But, as he had told Marietta in all truth and sincerity, he did not think it by any means indispensable that a man should be in love with his wife.

Five minutes later he had found Miss Mallet's hat and had restored it to its owner, who drew rein by his side and thanked him for his civility.

"What do you think of him?" she asked, referring to her steed.

"He moves well," answered Strahan; "he ought to make a nice light-weight hunter, if he can jump."

"Ah, that's just it," observed Betty; "I have put him over hurdles, and he flies them like a bird; but I expect he will want a lot of schooling before he can be called safe in a country of stone walls and banks, like this. He will have to have one or two nasty croppers before he finds out that it doesn't do to fly everything."

"But not with you on his back, I trust," said Strahan.

She made a little grimace. "Somebody must do it, and I am so light that there's no great danger of my breaking my bones. Besides, it so happens that every full-grown man connected with this establishment is the father of a family, and I can't trust the lads. Mine is undoubtedly the least valuable neck upon the premises."

"I should have said," remarked Strahan, "that it was by a very long way the most valuable."

"To whom? Not to its humble proprietor, I assure you. I have come to the conclusion that life isn't in the least a blessing."

"Good Heavens! what can have led you, of all people in the world, to form such a low opinion of yourself!"

"Oh, it isn't of myself; *I* am right enough. It's the others who, in this way or in that, are so objectionable, one and all!"

"As spokesman for the others," said Strahan, "I beg to express our deep sorrow and contrition. Of course we must be objectionable, since you call us so; but we really don't mean to be. At least, I can answer for one of us who doesn't."

"That," returned Betty, "isn't what granny used to call a sign of grace in the days when she had a leaning towards Nonconformity. You ought to have said that you were conscious of your failings and would try

to correct them. Though, to be sure, that wouldn't have been true."

She nodded to him, touched her horse with her heel and was off, like an arrow from a bow. What she meant he had no idea; but it occurred to him afterwards as a possible explanation that she might be provoked with him for delaying so long to declare himself. There was little or no personal vanity involved in that hypothesis. Strahan's contempt for women was so genuine and so deep-seated that a dozen of them might have cast themselves upon their knees before him without making his heart throb one beat the more quickly. Still the fact remained that Betty Mallet's neck was an exceedingly valuable one, and at a later hour of the day he took occasion to repeat to her his strong conviction as to its value.

It was in the library, shortly after luncheon, that he initiated a dialogue of which he foresaw the inevitable upshot. Lady Maria had gone out driving with a couple of old ladies; the few remaining guests who were still staying in the house had betaken themselves elsewhere, and Betty, curled up in an armchair, with one leg under her, was perusing the columns of the Sportsman, when she was entreated to run no more such risks as the schooling of a young horse implied.

"Dear me!" said she, after this question had been debated at some length, "does it matter so much as that?"

"It matters so much to me, Miss Mallet," answered Strahan deliberately, "that if I had the right to issue orders to you, you would never mount an unbroken horse again. Will you give me that right?"

It was a rather unusual method of wording a matrimonial offer; but he imagined that it would do as well as another, and no doubt he was right. He awaited her reply composedly; he could not for the life of him have said whether he hoped that it would take an affirmative or a negative form. Consequently, he was in no wise cast down when Betty, with a composure equal to his own, responded:

"No, thanks; all things considered, I prefer to remain my own mistress. Immensely touched and flattered, all the same, you know."

Strahan, as in duty bound, said, in a low, sad voice, "I ought not to have had the presumption to expect anything else. But I dare say you can understand what a blow this is to me."

"Oh, my dear man, what shocking humbug! Granny, for some extraordinary reasons best known to herself, has seen fit to spur you on, and I suppose you thought that, after all, an heiress wasn't to be sneezed at. I don't blame you a bit for that; but I must say that you are a much better hand at riding and shooting than you are at making love. Not, to tell you the truth, that it would have made the slightest difference if you had worshipped me; only I am glad to think that you can be dismissed without a scar upon your hard heart."

Strahan, for once, looked a little foolish. He was also a little mortified, as his next words showed.

"Isn't it," he asked, "rather inconsistent to accuse me in one breath of being a humbug and a poor actor?"

"Not a bit," answered Betty; "I didn't call you a successful humbug—far from it! If anybody is entitled to claim that distinction, I flatter myself that I am; for I need scarcely tell you that I have known for some little time what your intentions were, and you wouldn't have declared them, I presume, unless I had managed to make you feel sanguine."

Strahan did not think that that was an achievement to boast about, and he said so with some acerbity.

"Oh, well," returned Betty good humouredly, "we won't quarrel over it, anyhow. I forgive you, and I should think you would have no great difficulty in forgiving me. Let us part friends, if part we must."

He had not contemplated immediate departure from Chelton as a necessary result of the reverse which he had sustained; but after that hint he could not hesi-

tate. From the privacy of his bedroom he presently despatched a letter to Arlington-street in which he begged Marietta to remain in London a few days longer, as he would be coming up at once.

"For many reasons, I would much rather meet you in town than in these parts," he told her. "I should not like to be asked to Ludworth, and I doubt whether you would like to ask me. Since I last spoke to you I have been enabled to see my way a little more clearly. I can now offer, I mean, a little more in the way of immediate material ease and comfort—which, when all is said, does count. But these details are best reserved until I can put you in possession of them by word of mouth. At the present moment I can only think of the joy of seeing you once more and hearing you say—as I hope and believe I shall—that you love me. I have (between ourselves) had some little difficulty in kicking myself free from the harness which our good friends here have tried to make me wear; but that is now an accomplished fact, so there is no need to say any more about it."

He took it for granted that Betty would not betray him, which was an instance of his imperfect acquaintance with feminine character. The perfect acquaintance with his own character and motives which the girl had displayed did not give him much distress; he scarcely cared enough about her for that. The loss of her fortune, and of what her fortune might have been expected to bring, was, of course, a serious one; but he had done his best to secure these advantages. It would have been impossible to do more, and he could look back upon his past behaviour with that modest self-approbation which is so indispensable to real contentment. The future was even more agreeable to contemplate. Strahan felt pretty sure that the company would not, and could not afford to, renounce his services; his ambitions were of a nature which could be

gratified almost as well in Australia as in England, and —he loved Marietta.

"Oh, it isn't going to last," he said to himself; "everybody knows that that sort of thing doesn't last. But what then? A wise man takes his happiness when he can get it, and I don't see why I shouldn't be as happy as possible for two, or even three years. And afterwards one will be no worse off than other people; one will have precisely the same consolations as remain open to the virtuous. It is true that there will always be a skeleton—Colonel Vigne's skeleton—in the cupboard; but the key, I take it, is in my pocket, and nothing is more improbable than that my pocket or the lock will ever be picked."

During dinner he told Lady Maria how very sorry he was that he had no choice but to leave for London the next morning, and this intimation was received by her with less surprise and dismay than he had anticipated. Possibly she had been prepared for it by her granddaughter; in any case, it would have been beneath her dignity to look disappointed over the escape of a fish which she could not desire to land against his will. Moreover, she may have reflected that Mr. Strahan, after all, was not a very big fish.

"So sorry you are obliged to curtail your visit," was her reply; "but perhaps you will come back to us some day. Always delighted to see you!"

With that she turned her shoulder towards him. Obviously he had ceased to interest her, and such are the queer inconsistencies of human nature that he experienced a certain vexation and resentment. Betty, too, appeared to harbour no sort of ill feeling against her mercenary suitor. She took leave of him with a hearty shake of the hand and a hope that they might come across one another in the hunting-field before the winter was over. He was glad that things had fallen out as they had done; yet he would have been a little better pleased if these ladies had shown some signs of being less so.

However, it was easy enough to forget them. He had practically forgotten them, having many other things to think about, by the time that he reached the railway station the next morning, and it was not with Betty Mallet—nor indeed very much with Marietta Middlewood—that this mind was occupied while he paced to and fro upon the platform, waiting for the up express. In imagination he was a very long way from Derbyshire, fighting hard (as he knew that he would have to fight) for fame and fortune against hostile factions and adverse natural conditions. The country was by no means the vast gold-mine that it had been represented as being, and he was well aware that to extract the gold which he meant to extract from it would demand all the intelligence and influence over his fellowmen which he was happily conscious of possessing.

Recalled suddenly to actualities by a touch on the elbow, he wheeled round and found himself face to face with a burly, reddish-bearded man whom he at once recognised as an inspector of police with whom Lionel and he had held numerous conferences. Hard by stood an inspector of county constabulary, also known to him in connection with recent investigations.

"Ah, Mr. Golightly!" said he, addressing the former, "back in these parts again. Has anything fresh transpired?"

"Yes, sir," answered the officer rather gruffly, "something fresh has transpired. I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Strahan, that we hold a warrant for your apprehension on a charge of wilful murder."

The colour left Strahan's cheeks; but he was able to burst out laughing quite naturally.

"What rubbish!" he exclaimed. "Who has made such a preposterous charge?"

"The warrant was issued upon a sworn information," replied the other; "but if you will allow me to offer a word of advice, sir, you will ask no questions and reserve anything you may have to say until you are before the magistrate—even if you don't reserve your de-

fence then. Because you are certain to be committed for trial. Now, if you will come away quietly with us, there needn't be any unpleasantness here."

So Mr. Strahan's luggage went up to London without him, and remained unclaimed on its arrival at St. Pancras.

CHAPTER XLV.

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS.

ALTHOUGH Marietta had requested Strahan not to write to her again, it was with no very serious displeasure that she recognised amongst her correspondence one morning an envelope addressed in his handwriting. She had not expected, and had hardly wished for, tame acquiescence on his part, and so long as his reproaches reached her by post, not *vivà voce*, she was prepared to receive them complacently. A smile, therefore, rose to her lips and eyes while she perused the missive, of which a *précis* has been given above. It would, of course, be a simple matter to grant the request contained therein and to remain a few more days in London; what still continued to be an open question was whether it would be possible to return a favourable reply to the more momentous request which must needs follow. But she inclined to the belief that it would. That allusion of his to the prospect of material ease and comfort was not without effect upon her, and she liked to hear of his having successfully resisted the blandishments of Lady Maria.

"This," she said to herself, "proves at least that he is in earnest; and I think I am in earnest too. Indeed, I am sure I am! If it were not for my poor little Bob!—but Bob is too young to remember or care, and Lionel evidently won't care a straw. Yes; it will be

a thousand times better to begin a new life than to persevere with this impossible one."

Nevertheless, she paid the tribute of a sigh to the renounced life, as she opened another letter from Derbyshire, which contained several sheets, inscribed in Betty Mallet's bold, legible fist.

"I dare say you will laugh," Betty wrote, "when I tell you of the compliment that has been paid to me to-day. Mr. Strahan, if you please, has done me the honour to offer me his hand, and as much of his heart as is not already engaged. I should have called that average cheek a few months ago; but one's indiscretions and their consequences have made one humble; so I dropped a curtsey and said, 'No, thank you, sir,' as prettily as I could. The funny thing is that granny should have egged him on; I suppose she thinks anybody is better than nobody. In some ways I really rather like Mr. Strahan—though he isn't exactly what you could call a gentleman, is he?—but I don't feel in the least disposed to endow him with all my worldly goods, and one wonders a little at his having imagined that I could be so disposed. However, I told him that I forgave him, and I am endeavouring to forgive granny, who is now carrying her ears and tail rather low after the lecture which it was my duty to read her. The discomfited swain leaves for London to-morrow morning, I hear. My compliments to him and my best wishes if he looks you up, as he probably will."

A young lady who has received and declined an offer of marriage is generally supposed (though perhaps the hypothesis does not command universal credence) to keep that little experience to herself, and Betty Mallet, to do her justice, recognised that honourable obligation to the full; but in the present instance she had had reasons of her own for departing from conventional rules. It may even be that those same reasons had led her to give Mr. Strahan a certain amount of encourage-

ment which might easily have been withheld from him. If so her conduct must be considered as justified by the event; for Marietta, after having been thus made aware of Strahan's perfidy, started to her feet with clenched hands and blazing eyes.

"So that was what he meant by claiming his freedom!" she ejaculated wrathfully, forgetting that she herself had made a similar claim, and that she had even reminded him by letter of the nature of their compact. "He meant all along, then, to marry Betty, if she would have him, and now that she will have nothing to say to him, he falls back upon me as a *pis-aller!* Betty is quite right; he is not a gentleman. At the bottom of my heart I have always known that he was not!"

Possibly she had; possibly, too, Betty, who was no simpleton, had designedly made use of that parenthetical phrase. In any case, it helped to serve the very salutary purpose of making up Marietta's mind for her. It was simply out of the question, she thought, for her to love a man who was not a gentleman, and who had behaved so utterly unlike one. There was an end and a finish of that dream, and she was thankful to have been so roughly shaken out of it. She did not wish ever to see Strahan again; certainly, she would take very good care not to see him on his impending arrival in London.

Her cheeks were still flushed with anger when Lionel came in to ask whether she would be ready to return to Ludworth on the next day but one.

"I shall be ready to-day," was her prompt reply. "No, not to-day, I suppose, because the servants must have time to pack; but to-morrow, anyhow. Let us leave by the first train to-morrow."

Lionel was afraid that, owing to one or two engagements, he could not manage that; but he would willingly issue marching orders, he said, for the following morning. He added, looking inquiringly at his wife's perturbed countenance and the letters which she held in her hand:

"Has anything put you out? No bad news, I hope?"

"I don't know whether it ought to be dignified by that name," answered Marietta, with a short laugh; "but it is rather irritating sort of news. Betty writes to say that Mr. Strahan has had the impertinence to propose to her. She has refused him, of course."

"Oh, well," said Lionel tranquilly, "that is only what we foresaw, isn't it? At least, you foresaw that he would propose, and I foresaw that, if he did, he would be refused. I am sorry for him, but rather glad, I must confess, on her account and on my own. Under all the circumstances, I don't think we can call the poor fellow impertinent."

"I don't at all agree with you," returned Marietta, with that sharp, slightly nasal intonation which occasionally betrayed her Italian origin. "I think he has shown a disposition to be impertinent all along, and I hope I shall not be asked to receive him any more after this."

Lionel raised his eyebrows. "I can't quite get at your point of view with regard to Strahan," he remarked. "One day he is a valued friend, the next you want him to be turned away from the door. Is he really worth all the trouble that it seems to give you to make up your mind about him?"

"He is worth nothing at all," Marietta declared, in her foolish, impulsive way.

But she had a husband who, as some may think, was almost as foolish as she, seeing that he was a gentleman and that there is not much use in being a gentleman nowadays. He replied, without the faintest suspicion as to the cause of her acrimony:—

"You are too hard upon Strahan, Marietta. As a man of business he is worth a great deal, and I have always found him a very pleasant fellow as far as private relations go. Of course, one wasn't exactly eager to welcome him into the family; but it appears that one won't be called upon to do that, thank goodness! We

aren't supposed to know that he has offered himself to Betty, and we oughtn't to let our knowledge make any difference. Why, after all, should it?"

For a moment Marietta was half inclined to tell him why; but she subdued that half inclination. Nothing was more evident to her than that Lionel was incapable, and would always be incapable, of entering into her feelings. So she only said:—

"Oh, very well; we won't make a fuss about it. There is no occasion to ask him to stay with us, though, I suppose?"

Lionel, with a shrug of his shoulders, supposed not, and changed the subject. Presently he left the room, and Marietta did not see him again until close upon the dinner hour, when he returned home with an air of considerable agitation and an evening newspaper in his hand.

"A most extraordinary and unaccountable thing has happened," he announced. "I can't make head or tail of it; but I presume the news must be true. Just read this."

He pointed to a paragraph headed in large type,

THE MIDDLEWOOD MURDER. STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS.

The few lines which followed were, in truth, sufficiently startling to bring Marietta's heart into her mouth.

"We learn by telegram that Mr. Strahan, a gentleman well known in financial and colonial circles—who, it may be remembered, was staying with Lord Middlewood at the time of the recent mysterious tragedy, and who was the first to give information of the discovery of the murdered man's body—was arrested at Chelton, in Derbyshire, this morning, upon a charge of being himself the murderer. The police decline to make any statement upon the subject, but it appears certain that

evidence of a very surprising and unexpected character is in their hands."

"Do you believe this?" asked Marietta breathlessly.

"How do you mean? I believe that poor Strahan has been taken into custody; but, of course, I don't believe anything else. Those duffers must have discovered some mare's nest or other."

Marietta fell back in her chair. "I wonder what they mean by surprising and unexpected evidence," she murmured.

"Oh, that, I take it, is only the customary newspaper phrase. We shall hear more to-morrow morning, no doubt, and in all probability we shall hear that Strahan has been released. But I am very sorry that such a thing should have occurred, and—and I think I ought to have been told that it was in contemplation."

So strongly was Lionel of that opinion that, if he had had time, he would have gone to Scotland Yard the next day for the purpose of expressing it—especially as the morning papers contained no additional information relating to the arrest. But he had a number of other things to do, and all he could manage was to call at the Home Office and inquire for St. Quintin, who, he learned, was out of town, his chief also being absent. Returning home early in the afternoon, therefore, Lionel told his wife that he had decided, after all, to leave for Ludworth at once.

"I think, perhaps, I ought to be upon the spot to see what can be done about this stupid business," he said. "There may be a question of bail or something. You can follow me to-morrow; for, of course, it would be impossible for you to get ready on such short notice."

But Marietta begged to be allowed to accompany her husband, declaring that it would not take her maid ten minutes to put together the few things which she would require for one night.

"Besides," she added, "I want to know the truth.

It seems to me as incredible that Mr. Strahan can be guilty as that he would have been taken into custody if he had been innocent."

"The arrest of an innocent person isn't incredible," observed Lionel, smiling; "such mischances are always liable to occur in a free country. Still, one does feel that the police have been unpardonable idiots in this instance, and I shall probably have a word or two to say to them about it. Meanwhile, poor Strahan mustn't be left languishing under lock and key on account of some absurd mistake."

"But can you order him to be released?" Marietta inquired.

"Well, no; I can't give orders. But if he hasn't been released already, the chances are that he has been remanded, and unless there is some very strong evidence——"

"The papers say that there is," interjected Marietta.

"Oh, the papers know nothing about it, beyond the mere fact of the arrest. Unless there is some very strong *primâ facie* evidence—and there can't possibly be any—I shall be able to get him set at liberty, I imagine."

Marietta said no more; but she did not see why the existence of strong evidence should be an impossibility. That the man who professed to love her and had offered to take her under his protection should have murdered her father did seem to her to be impossible; though, if it came to that, the man had, to her certain knowledge, done other things which ought to have been impossible. She was bewildered and rather frightened, having in addition to legitimate causes for disquietude, a horrible dread that Strahan might make revelations unconnected with the charge brought against him. In her ignorance of the ordinary course of English criminal procedure, she had visions of an inquisitorial *juge d'instruction* and his capacity for eliciting all manner of damaging confessions from prisoners.

These haunted her throughout the rapid railway journey to the north and completely obliterated the wrath with which she had heard of her lover's treachery. That treachery she contemplated as a far-away, insignificant thing—the more insignificant because she was now sure that she had never really loved Strahan at all. She shuddered at the thought of her narrow escape; she shuddered again when she reflected that her escape was not yet necessarily complete. Ashamed of herself it cannot be said that she was; but there was a chance, not to say a probability, of her being made to feel dreadfully ashamed of herself ere long. It even occurred to her that there was a chance of her being disgraced and banished by a justly incensed husband. From time to time she stole a surreptitious glance at Lionel, who was frowning over the Racing Calendar, Ruff's Guide, The Statesman's Year Book, and The Report of the Royal Commissioners on the State of Agriculture, which useful works of reference he had thoughtfully brought with him to beguile the tedium of the way. His sharply cut profile conveyed an impression of implacability, she thought; he looked like a man who could never commit a shabby or dishonourable act, nor ever forgive such an act on the part of a fellow-creature. An admirable type, no doubt, in its way; but a rather narrow and unsympathetic one. It also struck her that he was remarkably handsome. He looked up from his studies every now and again to ask her whether she had everything that she wanted; to which (not without some sense of the irony of the situation) she replied that she had.

"When I have everything that I want," she said to herself, "I shall have taken leave of this unsatisfactory little world—*et encore!*"

At Derby, where they had to change carriages, they were met on the platform by a friend, who did not seem to be quite overjoyed by an encounter which he had evidently not anticipated. He could not, however, refuse to respond to Lionel's cry of:

"By George, St. Quintin, you're the man of all others whom I wanted to see! What are you doing here? Have you heard anything about Strahan?"

"I have just heard him committed for trial," answered St. Quintin. "That was a foregone conclusion, as you will see when you have read an account of the proceedings."

"Good Lord! you don't say so! What about bail?"

"It was not asked for; but I don't suppose that, in any case, it would have been granted. There will be a full report in to-morrow's papers, no doubt, and you will understand then that it would have been a rather risky proceeding to give the man an opportunity of making himself scarce."

But Lionel was not inclined to wait until the next morning. He caught his friend by the elbow, saying:

"Come on to Ludworth with us and stay the night. You aren't in any desperate hurry, I suppose?"

St. Quintin, looking extremely reluctant, replied that he was in rather a hurry. "But never mind! I'll travel as far as Ludworth with you and come straight back here. In that way I shall catch the last express for London. Perhaps it is better that you should hear all about it from me."

A few minutes later, Lionel and Marietta, seated in the compartment which had been reserved for them, were listening to their companion's succinct narrative of events which he had no small share in bringing about.

"Brydon's evidence was irresistible," St. Quintin said. "At any rate, it seemed so to me, and of course no attempt was made to shake it."

"Why of course?" asked Lionel quickly. "I should have thought that it might very easily have been shaken. The man declares that he actually witnessed the murder; yet it is only now that he sees fit to come forward; while we know that he made haste to bolt from the neighbourhood, where he had been staying for some time under an assumed name. I wonder

he wasn't transferred from the witness-box to the dock."

"Well," said St. Quintin, "Strahan's counsel will make the most of all that, I dare say, when the trial comes off; but I should think that he was well advised in reserving his defence. He appeared to be perfectly cool and to have all his wits about him. Brydon's flight admits of explanation, you see, and it is difficult to believe that he himself could have killed a man who in the course of a few more days would have paid him £350."

"How does he account for the fact that my poor father-in-law's pockets were rifled?" asked Lionel.

"He wasn't asked to account for that. His assertion is that he took to his heels immediately after the blow was struck. And personally, I must say that I am persuaded of the truth of that and all his other assertions."

"But you hate Mr. Strahan so much that you would believe anything in the world against him," struck in Marietta suddenly. "From what you say, this extraordinary accusation has been brought quite as much by you as by the witness whom you have unearthed. Naturally, you must be convinced, or pretend to be convinced, that the man is speaking the truth."

"I am as prejudiced as you like to call me, Lady Middlewood," answered St. Quintin submissively; "but when Brydon came to me and told me what he did, I was bound to inform the police. I couldn't have done otherwise."

Marietta jerked up her shoulders impatiently. She hardly knew what to think or what to hope for; perhaps what pressed upon her most for the moment was the fear of damaging disclosures and the conviction that St. Quintin, who had been more or less openly an enemy of hers ever since the distant Bagni di Lucca days, would be only too glad to serve her an ill turn. Why could he not mind his own business?

But Lionel hastened to say, "My dear fellow, you

were perfectly right, and we are very much indebted to you. All the same, one may be allowed to look upon the testimony of such an informer as Brydon with a certain amount of incredulity. Rather more than his word, or even his oath, would be required to make me accept his statement, I confess. By the way, what has become of him?"

"He has gone back to London. I should have travelled with him, only I was detained at the last moment. He won't be lost sight of, though," answered St. Quintin, divining Lionel's thought.

"Well," observed the latter, "we shall not have long to wait for the next assizes, fortunately. Meanwhile, we ought to assume, I think, that Strahan has been falsely accused. For my own part, I can't doubt that he has."

St. Quintin, being equally unable to doubt the truth of the accusation, held his peace, and at the next station he left the train. He was not sorry to escape; for Marietta's hostile criticisms on his conduct embarrassed him, and, indeed, it was a fact that, but for his presence and support, Brydon would never have plucked up courage enough to give the evidence which had led to Strahan's committal. So, although he had done neither more nor less than his duty, he was fain to admit to himself that he was open to the imputation of vindictive motives.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE CASE FOR THE ACCUSED.

Lionel's first thought, after reaching home, was to secure the highest talent obtainable on behalf of his unfortunate friend; but this, he learned on inquiry, had already been done by Strahan's solicitors. His next idea

was to pay a visit of sympathy and encouragement to the accused; and he was surprised at the vehement opposition which so natural a wish encountered from Marietta. She employed every argument, good and bad, that she could think of to dissuade him from his purpose, and at length, finding these of no avail, implored him, as a personal favour to herself, to abandon it.

"Oh, I must see him; I couldn't possibly turn my back upon him at such a time," was Lionel's decisive reply. "I am sorry to have to refuse you anything, Marietta; but—why should you make a personal matter of it?"

"When he is accused of having murdered my father!"

"Well, he is falsely accused. Surely you don't imagine that he is guilty?"

"I imagine all sorts of things; I don't know what to imagine," she answered—and that was true enough—"but I can't imagine that your seeing him will do any good. And it is not in the least likely that you will hear the truth from him. I have always warned you—haven't I?—that he is not to be trusted."

"Sometimes you have. But, as I am neither a judge nor a juryman, it really cannot matter very much whether I hear the truth or a lie from him.

Marietta could scarcely venture to say, "Promise me not to believe anything that he may tell you!" That, however, was what she would fain have said, and the hours of her husband's absence on his charitable mission were spent by her in an agony of suspense and apprehension. A man in Strahan's desperate plight might so easily, she thought, be tempted to involve others in his ruin!

In reality, of course, the very last thing that Strahan was likely to do was to alienate one who would assuredly be called as a witness for the defence; nor, in spite of what had transpired before the magistrates, did he regard his plight as by any means desperate.

Lionel found him calm, collected, and, to all appearance, in excellent spirits.

"Awfully good of you to look me up, old man," said he; "but, to tell the truth, I rather expected that you would. This is a queer sort of situation for me to have got into, isn't it?"

"It is abominable that you should be in prison," answered Lionel; "and yet I don't know that anybody can be fairly blamed for it—except, of course, that fellow Brydon. What do you suppose can have been his motive for denouncing you?"

Strahan smiled. "One must presume that he doesn't like me, which is really rather ungrateful of him, considering that I did my best to get him out of a mess almost as awkward as this. But he has evidently become a dipsomaniac, and it is possible that he may be labouring under some hallucination or other."

"Don't you think that he himself may have been the murderer?"

"Well, that also is possible. It seems that poor Colonel Vigne promised to pay him a considerable sum of money for certain letters, and one conjectures a quarrel, brought about by the non-delivery of the letters on the discovery that they were worthless."

"According to St. Quintin, they were actually delivered."

"Then what has become of them? I suppose all Colonel Vigne's papers were looked through, after his death, were they not?"

"Oh, yes; I did that myself, and I can swear that no such documents were amongst them. I should be inclined to suspect that he had them about him at the time, and that he was deprived of them, either by Brydon or——"

"Or by me, eh?" suggested Strahan placidly. "Well, if Brydon is to be believed, I should have had very good reasons for wishing to deprive anybody of them; but really I don't know to what letters he can possibly allude. I may have written to Maggie once

or twice—in fact, I am pretty sure that I did—but I can never have written anything of a nature to connect me with the unfortunate girl's suicide. I only wish the letters were discoverable; for, assuming that they exist, they would probably tell in my favour. But the whole story is such a crazy one that nobody out of a lunatic asylum is likely to believe in it."

"St. Quintin," observed Lionel meditatively, "is not a lunatic."

Strahan's face hardened. "St. Quintin," said he, "is, for some reason or other, my enemy. He has never let slip an opportunity of trying to do me an injury; it is solely owing to him that I am where I am now, and when I come out we shall have a little account to square, he and I."

Lionel did not undertake the defence of his absent friend. "All I meant to say," he resumed after a few moments of silence, "was that when it is a case of A.'s word against B.'s, A. will probably find as many supporters as B.—other things being equal."

"But, my dear Middlewood, other things aren't equal. To begin with, I am not an habitual drunkard; in the second place, my reputation stands a little bit higher than that of my accuser; and in the third place I can't be required to prove a negative."

"Yes; there is all that against the chance of a conviction—which indeed I don't for one moment fear. What I was thinking of was private opinion. There are always, I am afraid, a certain number of people who do expect an accused man to prove a negative, and won't be persuaded of his innocence until he does."

"May I ask whether you mean Lady Middlewood?" inquired Strahan rather sharply.

Lionel declared that he did not mean any one person in particular; but his reply was given with a shade of embarrassment which was at once detected by his questioner, who returned quietly:

"Well, I won't press the point."

Lionel scarcely improved matters by pleading that

some allowance ought to be made for the poor old Colonel's only child, to whom it had naturally seemed inexplicable, all this time, that there should be so much difficulty in discovering the assassin.

"And you know what women are; it's hard to convince them that there can be smoke without fire. Not that Marietta believes you to be guilty; her own words to me were that she didn't know what to believe. Only I fancy—I may be wrong; but I fancy she is under the impression that you had something of a grudge against her father."

"Or perhaps that he had a grudge against me?" suggested Strahan quietly.

His tone was a little bitter, and there was a great deal of bitterness in his heart. He was clever enough to form a tolerably accurate surmise as to the nature of Marietta's feelings, and for the moment he was not far from hating the woman whom, after a fashion, he loved. He could have pardoned her, had she shrunk, when it came to the point, from tempting Fortune by flying with him across the seas; he could not forgive her for abandoning him (as he perceived that she had done) in the hour of his extremity. That he happened to be guilty was no excuse; she should have been certain of his innocence, and should have proclaimed her certitude. Therefore it was that he made the above interrogative remark, which brought a quick frown to Lionel's brow.

The latter was aware, indeed, of the misgivings with which Colonel Vigne had regarded the intimacy between Marietta and Strahan, and he presumed that allusion was being made to those misgivings—which struck him as a piece of rather bad taste.

"My father-in-law could have had no grudge against you," he said drily.

"But he had. I don't blame him for it; no doubt, if I had been in his place, I should have felt considerable animosity against a man who knew as much as I chanced to know. At the same time, I think the sad-

dle ought to be put upon the right horse. Under existing circumstances, you see, I can hardly afford to have it represented that Colonel Vigne was in my way, instead of my being in his."

"I don't understand you," said Lionel.

"Of course you don't, and I assure you that I would very much rather remain incomprehensible. But for the reason that I have mentioned, I am afraid I must speak out. I can't help thinking it a great pity that those who ought to have spoken out long ago should have preferred to keep you in the dark. Secrets of that kind are bound to be discovered sooner or later, and my own conviction from the first has been that you would be too just and too generous to blame your wife for what, after all, is no fault of hers."

This noble exordium led up to the announcement of Marietta's illegitimacy. Strahan truthfully stated what had been the source of his own information upon the subject, asserted that he had more than once urged the late Colonel Vigne to make a clean breast of it to his son-in-law, and insinuated, without actually saying, that Lady Middlewood herself had been a party to a somewhat ignoble deception. That was his method of hitting back. It was also, as he had frankly avowed, one of his methods of defending himself.

"All this is no particular business of mine, and, for choice, I would rather not have been the one to enlighten you," he repeated, in conclusion; "but at least you will see now that, although the poor old gentleman might have had some conceivable motive for knocking me on the head, I could have had none whatever for treating him in that way."

Lionel, it must be confessed, received a very disagreeable shock. He could not doubt the accuracy of Strahan's statement (which explained the otherwise unaccountable behaviour of the old Princess in Rome, as well as Colonel Vigne's rather obstinate reticence respecting the past), and there was just enough of aristocratic prejudice in him to make him wince at the idea

of having given his name to a girl who had none of her own. But this was a trifle as compared with the inference that his wife had deliberately withheld the truth from him, and he said decisively:

"One thing is certain: Marietta has never been told of this."

"Oh, I should hope not—I should quite hope not," answered Strahan soothingly. "And, if she hasn't been told, most likely she never need be. It isn't a matter about which you will care to talk, and I see no reason why it should come out at the trial. But I thought I was entitled, just between you and me, to clear myself of the suspicion at which you hinted."

Unquestionably he was so entitled, and Lionel would have been rather puzzled to say what it was that at once rubbed him the wrong way and shook his faith in the man's veracity. Something undefinable about Strahan's voice and manner, perhaps—something which seemed to reveal a cad, if not a liar.

He pulled himself together, dismissed the subject, with the remark that it was not particularly relevant, and soon brought his visit to a conclusion. There was not, it appeared, very much that he could do for his friend; but what he could do should, he promised, be done, and, since the assizes were to be held almost immediately, the prisoner's period of incarceration would, fortunately, be brief. His leave-taking was, in spite of himself, a little less cordial than his greeting had been, and he was not sorry to be once more out in the open air.

He made his way through the streets with a bent head and a rather heavy heart, thinking less of the alleged criminal whom he had just quitted than of the painful revelation which had been made to him. He had had a genuine respect and affection for the old Colonel, and it was not pleasant to reflect that the Colonel had deceived him. Still less pleasant was an ugly, persistent little suspicion that Marietta might have been privy to the deception. But this suspicion

he determined to banish from his mind, and did temporarily succeed in banishing: it was an unworthy and an unwarranted suspicion, he told himself, despite Strahan's tolerably evident opinion that there was ground for entertaining it. As for the statement itself, that must be verified, he supposed; he would have to put himself in communication with the Magliacci family respecting it, however distasteful such a task might be to him. But the secret no doubt could be, and ought to be, kept. Assuming that his wife was ignorant of it, there was, as Strahan had said, no need to enlighten her.

Marietta stepped quickly out into the hall to meet him, on his return to Ludworth. It was only natural that she should be anxious to hear his report; yet her bright, wide-open eyes had a look of something beyond anxiety in them, while her deadly pallor seemed to indicate an emotion more poignant than mere curiosity.

"Well?" she whispered, with bated breath.

"Well, I have seen him," answered Lionel, "and he appears to be sanguine. He is sure to be acquitted, I should say; for the unsupported evidence against him will hardly be accepted by any jury, and, from what he tells me, he can, if he likes, prove that he had no imaginable end to serve by taking your father's life."

"What did he tell you?" asked Marietta eagerly.

"Oh, a few things which may be believed or disbelieved, and which I would rather not repeat. There will be no occasion for them to come out at the trial, I hope; but if they do, it can't be helped, nor will anybody have a right to blame him."

"I know what he has told you," exclaimed Marietta, "and I warned you not to believe him! But I can see that you do. It is false, though—what he said about me; he only said it to save his own neck!"

In these hasty ejaculations Lionel read the confirmation of his fears. Marietta and he were altogether at cross purposes; but he not unnaturally took it for granted that they were thinking of one and the same

subject, and his wish was to spare her. He said to himself that she had very likely been ignorant of her illegitimacy at the time of their marriage, that she might have been informed of it by Strahan, and that her subsequent reticence was, after a fashion, excusable. So all he said was:

"You are mistaken if you suppose that I accept Strahan's assertions as being necessarily gospel-truth: they will have to be substantiated or refuted by and by; but they have only an indirect bearing upon his present case. And, to do him justice, he refrained from accusing you of—of actual complicity."

Marietta was not reassured. In her heart she had always been a little afraid of Lionel, and now his judicial calmness alarmed her more than any reproaches would have done. How much or how little Strahan had revealed she could not guess; but she foresaw that, in the event of all the facts coming to light, she would be condemned without mercy, and the idea of such condemnation had become appalling to her.

"At any rate," said she, half-involuntarily, "he cannot deny that he proposed to Betty."

Lionel raised his eyebrows. "Why should he? He was as much entitled to propose to her as a cat is to look at a king. But we didn't allude to that. As you may imagine, we had matters of rather more urgent importance to discuss."

"I should have called that a matter of very urgent importance; but you are so extraordinary! You—you never let me know what is really in your mind!"

"Don't I? And yet most people would tell you, I think, that I am pretty straight. Do you always let me know what is really in your mind, Marietta?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I did! Will you believe me if I tell you that I detest that man?"

To Marietta's surprise and relief, her husband laughed, and answered, "Oh, yes; that is certainly not incredible. Only he may be less detestable than you think he is; and as for his being a murderer——"

"My first thought, after I heard the news, was that he must be the murderer!" cried Marietta.

"Yes—and you thanked God, I remember when I told you that we had no idea who was guilty. I can understand now what it was that you dreaded. You thought that your father was perhaps the aggressor, and that hasty blows had been exchanged—as, no doubt, they might have been. But I believe we may dismiss that theory, which is really a rather far-fetched one."

Lionel added, after a moment, "I don't want to press you in any way, Marietta; but—would you not feel a little more comfortable if you were to be perfectly open with me?"

Almost she was tempted to respond to this invitation, strange though it sounded in her ears; but her courage failed her. The most unimpassioned man in the world could scarcely have spoken like that to a wife who had been within an ace of deserting him, and it seemed certain that Strahan had not divulged the whole truth. Therefore she replied, with an air of candid astonishment:

"I don't know what you are talking about. I have concealed nothing from you, Lionel—I give you my word of honour that I have nothing to conceal!"

"In that case," he returned at once, "there is no more to be said. I fancied that there might be something; but I see that I was mistaken, and I beg your pardon."

CHAPTER XLVII.

ST. QUINTIN HAS A PLEASANT WALK.

STRAHAN'S arrest and his impending trial, upon a charge of having committed the mysterious crime which had been such a godsend to the newspapers during the

dull season caused, as may be supposed, no small stir throughout the length and breadth of England. The affair would have been a sufficiently sensational one, even had the persons concerned therein been less socially prominent; as it was, public excitement ran high, and editors of newspapers could but lament their inability to discuss a case which was still *sub judice*. Nothing, however, forbade some of them to regale their readers with full details relating to the prisoner's past history and daily reports as to his actual condition of health and spirits; while poor Lionel was made to writhe by the free style in which his and his wife's intimacy with the alleged criminal was commented upon. The liberty of the press is rightly prized, no doubt, by a fine, independent race; yet there are occasions when one feels that a judicious touch of censorship would do nobody any harm. There are even occasions when one would like very well to be one's self the official censor—armed with a good, serviceable knout.

Lady Maria was less sensitive. She read the newspapers carefully through her spectacles every day, and found them, upon the whole, interesting and entertaining, if now and then a trifle impertinent. These penny-a-liners, luckily, did not know what a very narrow escape she had had of betrothing her granddaughter to the hero of their narratives, and she was so grateful to them for their ignorance, as well as to Providence for having mercifully preserved her from herself, that she really could not find it in her heart to wax wrath over imaginative paragraphs. What did vex her a good deal was that many of these paragraphs contained veiled allusions of which she was unable to make head or tail.

"Now what," she demanded of Betty, as she laid down a weekly sheet which had just arrived, "can be the meaning of this?—'The air is full of strange rumours respecting the forthcoming murder trial at Derby. The most strenuous exertions are being, and will be, made by influential persons to exclude all evidence, save such as bears directly upon the facts; but

these are not likely to prove successful, and disclosures may be anticipated which, whether they tell for or against the prisoner, will probably cause a flutter in aristocratic circles.' "

"I am sure I don't know, and I don't care," answered Betty contemptuously.

She did know—or was, at least, afraid that she did—and she cared a good deal; but her grandmother was the last person in the world with whom she was desirous of conversing upon such topics.

"Then all I can say, my dear," returned Lady Maria, with some severity, "is that you ought to care. And certainly we ought both of us to know. Why, it is not in the least unlikely, I understand, that we shall be called as witnesses, and one doesn't want to have things sprung upon one all of a sudden in open court. Lionel is so short and rude about it all that there is really no use in applying to him; but something might be got out of Mr. St. Quintin, who seems to have been behinds the scenes all along, and who, of course, will have to be present at the trial. Just write him a line, will you, and say that we shall be delighted to put him up when the assizes open—or a day or two earlier, if he can manage it."

"He won't come," said Betty.

"How can you tell that, my dear? For my part, I think he will. Anyhow, let us give him the chance."

The old lady, to whom St. Quintin's hopeless passion was no secret, was not above utilising her granddaughter as a magnet. There would not, she thought, be the slightest danger in so doing, and she was burning with curiosity to ascertain how much St. Quintin knew. The reticence of Lionel and Marietta, who evidently knew more than they cared to reveal, had already exasperated her almost beyond endurance.

It may be that Betty herself was not unwilling to hold a preliminary conference with the instigator of all this trouble; for she did as she was told, and it was

scarcely in accordance with her custom to obey orders which were distasteful to her.

By return of post she received a grateful acknowledgment of her letter and of Lady Maria's kind invitation, which the writer very much regretted that it was not in his power to accept. "The fact is," St. Quintin explained, "that the principal witness for the prosecution is more or less under my charge, and he is in such a queer, nervous state that I should hardly like to lose sight of him for any length of time. However, I can easily manage to go over to Chelton for an hour or two on the day before the trial, if you will allow me. I can quite understand that Lady Maria has been, as you say, worried and annoyed by the newspaper stories; although they are, to the best of my belief, pure inventions."

"That will do very well," said Lady Maria, on being informed of St. Quintin's reply; "he can come over to luncheon, and I will have a talk with him afterwards. I must say for that young man that he is an amiable, biddable creature. One sometimes wishes for his sake, that he were a little better-looking and had a rather higher opinion of himself."

"I can't say that I have found him particularly biddable," remarked Betty, "and I haven't noticed that there is very much amiss with his opinion of himself. As for looks, they're a matter of taste; I don't see why some people shouldn't consider him quite handsome."

Whether or not that was Miss Mallet's own opinion of St. Quintin's somewhat homely features, she must have been anxious to obtain an early sight of them; for when the day appointed for his visit to her grandmother arrived, she was at the pains of walking nearly the whole way to the station in order to intercept him. She stopped the brougham which had been sent to meet him and peremptorily beckoned to him to descend, telling the coachman to drive on.

"I am sorry to have to make you walk," said she, as soon as her request had been complied with; "but

there are questions which can't well be asked before granny, and it isn't such a very bad day for a walk after all."

It was one of those still, gray autumn days, with a suspicion of frost in the air, and long shafts of sunlight piercing the low clouds at intervals, which almost all Englishmen love; but if it had been blowing, snowing, or pouring in torrents, St. Quintin would have been none the less delighted to walk any distance by the side of his present companion, and he almost said so. He thought better of his intention, however, and merely declared his readiness to answer to the best of his ability all the questions which might be put to him.

"To begin with, then," said Betty, "did the man really do it?"

"Strahan, do you mean? Well, of course that is what remains to be proved; but, personally, I think he did. I believe Brydon's story."

"Will he be hanged then?"

"Ah! that again is more than I can tell you. One doesn't know what line of defence he will adopt; but he is sure to be skilfully defended, and poor Brydon will not cut much of a figure in the witness-box, I am afraid. The absence of any apparent motive for the murder, and the fact of his having done Brydon a cruel injury will count in Strahan's favour, no doubt."

"Well," said Betty, after a pause, "I can't help hoping that he will get off; though I think, as you do, that he is guilty. I have had a sort of feeling all along that he must know something about it."

"And yet," St. Quintin ventured to remark, "I remember your snubbing me rather savagely for saying that if Strahan didn't know who committed the murder, nobody was ever likely to know."

Betty laughed a little.

"Well, perhaps you had earned a snub," said she; "if you want people to have patience with you, you shouldn't be always in the right. I shouldn't wonder if I had taken Mr. Strahan's part because he has been

so abominably in the wrong. Partly for that reason, anyhow, and partly because he really is a good sportsman."

St. Quintin looked puzzled.

"I suppose I am very dull; but I don't follow you," he confessed.

"You'll admit, at all events," returned Betty, "that he is a fine horseman and good shot—that's something, isn't it? As to my taking his part because he was in the wrong—well, that's rather more complicated. When I said that I had taken his part, I meant that I had gone out of my way to be nice to him—that I had got granny to ask him here, and so on. I wonder whether you are too dull to understand why?"

St. Quintin shook his head, and feared that he was. Presently he took the liberty of adding:—

"Of course, when I heard of his staying here, I thought what everybody else thought; and, of course, I rejoiced, as any friend of yours must have rejoiced, when it came to my knowledge later that you had refused the fellow's impertinent offer of marriage."

"Which, I presume, you paid me the compliment of expecting me to jump at. No; strange as it may appear to you, Mr. Strahan failed to conquer my young affections. But there was somebody else whose affections it seemed to me that there was a risk of his capturing—somebody who was not free, and who required to have it proved to her that he was capable of treachery. Must one put things absolutely in black and white, or will that do? It ought to do, for I am sure you saw what I saw."

St. Quintin nodded. "I am very glad," he said simply, after a moment.

"I wanted to explain my conduct to you," Betty resumed. "You probably don't approve of it, though you are kind enough to say that you are glad; but perhaps you will allow that my intentions this time were rather better than usual. They weren't so very evil even when I dined at Hampton Court with

Charlie Jocelyn; but that I mustn't expect you to believe."

"I have never thought that your intentions were bad—or your conduct either," St. Quintin declared. "I suppose you mean that it is just as impertinent of me to say I am glad now as it was to say I was sorry that evening at Hampton Court. I dare say it is; only you would forgive me, perhaps, if you knew——"

"If I knew what?"

He looked down and laughed rather sheepishly. "If you knew what an utter idiot I am! However, I am not going to tell you, and you are not very likely to guess."

"From my youth up," was Betty's calm reply, "I have always been accounted extraordinarily clever at guessing things. Far be it from me to deny that you are an utter idiot; but—I don't particularly dislike that form of idiocy. Unless, of course, it is pushed to ridiculous lengths."

St. Quintin glanced up quickly and, meeting her eyes, perceived that his secret had ceased to be a secret.

"There shall be nothing of that kind," he hastened to say. "I can't pretend to regret that you know the truth; but I promise you that I will never allude to the subject again."

"Oh, but that is exactly what I call pushing idiocy to ridiculous lengths. You were an idiot to think that I ever dreamt of marrying Charlie Jocelyn——"

"But you as good as told me that you did dream of it!"

"Well, you were an idiot to believe me, and a still greater idiot to believe that I could possibly marry Mr. Strahan. Don't go and be superlative in the way that you threaten to be!"

He stared at her in speechless amazement. "You can't," he stammered out at last—"you can't mean——"

But she was able to convince him that she could and did. Who can attempt to account for feminine vagaries? A wise man had best acknowledge that there is never any use in quarrelling with them, and that

sometimes their results may be accepted with wondering gratitude. St. Quintin, as may be supposed, had no quarrel to pick with the lady of high rank and large fortune whom he had been crazy enough to adore, nor anything, save his personal unworthiness, to urge against a union which could not but render him supremely happy.

"But, never so long as I live shall I come to understanding it!" he modestly exclaimed.

"Oh, I know you!—you'll come to understand it fast enough," Betty returned, "and you'll be about as implacable a domestic tyrant as there is in England. I can see you from here gently, but firmly, forbidding me to do half the things that I shall want to do. However, as I said just now, you have a trick of being always in the right, and perhaps that is why I shall prove a submissive wife. One learns to admire in one's husband, you see, what is downright infuriating on the part of a disinterested friend."

Thus the unhappy captive in Derby gaol was clean forgotten, and it was reserved for Lady Maria Halsted, whose donkey-carriage presently hove in sight, to put questions which had escaped her granddaughter's memory.

"I came out to meet you, Mr. St. Quintin," the old lady announced; "they told me that you were walking up from the station, and really there is no time to be lost. I must be thoroughly coached, please, if I am to stand cross-examination in open court by a lot of impertinent barristers."

St. Quintin did not think it probable that Lady Maria would be cross-examined, or even called, at the approaching trial; but he replied to her numerous queries as patiently and categorically as a preoccupied man could be expected to do, and it was not until they were within doors that he took courage to blurt out a piece of intelligence which he felt sure would be received with displeasure, as well as incredulity.

It must be owned that Lady Maria was not alto-

gether pleased; but she said at once that she had had too long an experience of Betty's eccentricities to be astonished. "You are no match for her in point of position, of course," was the old lady's candid remark; "but one remembers that you have shown yourself a match for her in other respects, and I'm sure I hope you will keep it up! There is this to be said for you, that you are a gentleman by birth——"

"Which you didn't seem to think essential in the case of somebody else," interpolated Betty.

"And that you are a steady, well-conducted young man," proceeded Lady Maria. "What Lionel will think I don't know; but I presume he will hardly be so unjust as to blame me."

"And if he is," observed Betty, "you can assure him that you did your very best to provide him with a totally different brother-in-law."

"Well, well!" said Lady Maria; "things might have been better; but there's no denying that they might have been worse. Moreover, they are ordered for us."

"Which is an immense consolation, and relieves us of all responsibility," Betty remarked. "Now let us go and get something to eat."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MR. BRYDON RETIRES.

As the day appointed for the trial about which all England was talking drew near, Marietta's apprehensions became almost more acute than she could bear. It had been notified to her that she, as well as Lord Middlewood, would be required to give evidence, and she could not feel sure that this would prove to be of

the brief and formal character that she was led to expect. Lionel, when questioned, replied that he hoped it would be; but he was evidently aware that disagreeable queries might be put, and he advised her somewhat emphatically not to attempt anything in the shape of prevarication. Her wisest course, he told her, would be to say as little as possible beyond yes and no, and to keep always within the limits of the strict truth. For the rest, he showed a decided disinclination to talk about the subject, and his manner, though kindly and considerate, was rather chilling. That he had discovered something she could not doubt; but to what extent she had been betrayed it was very difficult to determine. At times she fancied that he wished her to make a clean breast of it; at other moments she felt convinced that he would never forgive her if she did. And Strahan, who was fighting for his life, with his back against the wall, would assuredly not spare her. If in any way he could improve his own case by ruining a foolish woman, ruined that foolish woman would be! Such was Marietta's estimate of a man to whom she had so nearly entrusted her whole future.

Absurd though these fears were, there was nobody to point out their absurdity to her, and at length—being well-nigh in despair—she abruptly told her husband that she could not face the imminent ordeal. "You must make some excuse for me," she said; "you must declare that I am too ill to appear. That is true; for I do feel horribly ill. Besides, my testimony can't really be wanted; I know nothing at all about it."

"I am afraid you will have to nerve yourself to appear," answered Lionel decisively; "this isn't an invitation which can be declined on the plea of a headache. In all probability, your examination will only occupy a few minutes; still there is, I believe, a chance of your being pressed to give information about a matter which—well, you have given me your word of honour that you know nothing of it; so I must not assume that that can be troubling you."

Marietta clasped her fingers together tightly and the tears came into her eyes. "You mean," she returned, "that that is just what you do assume! My word of honour!—ah, I am afraid that you do not think that is worth much! Why do you make it so hard for me to speak! I wanted to tell you everything, and—and I think there has been some excuse for me. But I know you will never admit that there can be any excuse for deceit."

"My dear," answered Lionel, taking her hand and softening immediately, "I think that in this case there was great excuse. You had not only yourself to consider, and although I must own that I wish I hadn't been deceived, I can understand and forgive. I would have said this before, if I hadn't honestly thought that it might be possible to spare you any allusion to the subject."

Marietta hung her head. "You are very generous," she murmured.

He certainly had the appearance of being somewhat abnormally so; yet, strangely enough, it did not strike her as preposterous that he should treat her proposed desertion of him with such equanimity. It was, after all, in a great measure his own fault that she had contemplated deserting him, and she rather expected him to display further generosity by admitting as much. However, he disappointed her in that respect. His next remark was the utterly inexplicable one of:

"I hoped, you see, that Strahan had not spoken to you about this. He quite led me to suppose that he had not; although he acknowledged that he had spoken to your father."

"That he had spoken to my father and not to me!" ejaculated Marietta. "What do you mean?—how could such a thing have been possible? My father, I know, was afraid of what might happen; but it was not then, it was not until long afterwards, that I consented—and indeed, I never did actually consent."

"To do what?" asked Lionel.

"Well—to run away with him. But I doubt whether I should have gone when it came to the push—even if my eyes had not been opened by Betty's letter. For I did not really love him; it was only that I believed he was in love with me and—and that I knew you were not!"

It was well for her that her eyes were cast down and that she did not see her husband's face. His voice was quite steady and under control as he replied:

"You cannot have known that, Marietta, because it isn't the truth. What I told you before we went up to London is the truth; I haven't changed since our marriage, and I never shall, for I am an unchangeable sort of person. But I am also an undemonstrative sort of person."

"That is just it!" she interrupted eagerly.

"Yes, I'm undemonstrative, and I'm rather easily snubbed. We haven't understood one another, and very likely the fault has been as much mine as yours; but it isn't too late, perhaps, to turn over a new leaf."

She assured him that it was not. Looking up into his face at last, and noticing how pale and drawn it looked, she was conscious of a thrill of exaltation and was able to persuade herself that in this moment of discomfiture she had won the victory which she had desired all along to win. Something to that effect though not in those words, she intimated, begging him once more to pardon her and promising that she, on her side, would gladly treat bygones as bygones. And he responded after a fashion which she deemed satisfactory. Generous he undoubtedly was; it may have been his misfortune—it was, in any case, his inevitable destiny—to be just, into the bargain; so that he could not in his heart acquit the wife whom he loved and forgave. But perhaps the only important thing was that he should love and forgive her.

As soon as he was once more alone, he sat down to mentally review the strangely altered situation, and it must be confessed that his sense of justice was not

strong enough to resist a fierce longing that he might hear Strahan condemned to suffer the extreme penalty of the law. A man may be a liar, a traitor and an impostor without being a murderer; still, when such a man is charged with murder, it is permissible to assume that the chances are in favour of his guilt, and the surmise which now forced itself upon Lionel was, in fact, absolutely correct. The quarrel, its origin and its results had no further mystery for him. And then that story of Marietta's illegitimacy, which he had so nearly mentioned to her, and was glad to think that he had abstained from mentioning—was it a malicious lie? Truth or falsehood, he would keep it to himself, he resolved, unless allusion should be incidentally made to it in the course of the trial. For his own satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, he could ascertain the state of the case later; but he would remain silent respecting it. There were, indeed, so many matters respecting which it would behove him to observe silence that one more or less would scarcely add to the weight of that burden of secrecy.

Meanwhile, his first duty was to keep up Marietta's spirits and conduct her to Derby, where it was probable that they would be detained for several days. He could truthfully assure her that he did not think there was any likelihood of the statements which she dreaded forming a part of the prisoner's defence, and she appeared tranquillised by his assurances.

"It will be a horrible ordeal, and I wish we were well through it," she remarked, as they drew near their journey's end on the ensuing day; "but, happen what may, it can't now be as bad as I thought it was going to be. You don't think that the man is guilty, or that the jury will find him guilty, do you?"

"We shall know better what to think when we have heard Brydon's evidence," was Lionel's evasive reply; "everything must, naturally, depend upon that."

But they were not destined to hear, nor were the newspapers destined to report, the cross-examination of

the witness upon whom the prosecution relied. For while St. Quintin (who never should have lost sight of that witness) had been in a seventh heaven of delight at Chelton, and while Lord and Lady Middlewood had been composing their conjugal differences at Ludworth, an event had occurred which is always liable to occur in the case of habitual drunkards who are forcibly debarred from yielding to the craving which their will is powerless to resist. St. Quintin, who, with an elongated countenance, came out to meet his friends at the entrance of the hotel where they had engaged rooms, drew Lionel aside to whisper:

"We're done! Poor Brydon has been found in his bedroom, with his throat cut. It's a ghastly end to a tragic business, and I feel that I am to blame for it; but it never occurred to me to think of this as one of the dangers of leaving him to himself for a few hours! Like a fool, I fancied that I had taken every reasonable precaution when I gave strict orders that he was on no account to be supplied with any intoxicating liquor during my absence."

Brydon, it appeared, had eagerly and even tearfully demanded intoxicating liquors, and, on these being refused to him, had locked himself into his bedroom where, in a moment of mental aberration (subsequently pronounced to be such by an intelligent coroner's jury), he had put an end to himself.

"Poor devil!" murmured Lionel when, half an hour or so later, he had heard all that there was to hear about the matter; "I am sorry for him. Still, one can only suppose that he had perjured himself once, and was afraid of doing it a second time."

"No doubt," agreed St. Quintin, "that is what everybody will suppose. It isn't what I myself suppose. I am almost as certain as I am of my own existence that he saw Strahan kill Colonel Vigne; but he was so broken down, and in such a desperate funk of what Strahan might do to him, that I shouldn't have felt at all certain of his standing to his guns under

cross-examination. And perhaps, after all, it is as well, in some ways, that that rascal should be acquitted."

"You think he will be acquitted, then?" asked Lionel.

"I don't see how he can possibly be convicted now. All the same, he won't exactly leave the court without a stain upon his character, and I should hope that you, at all events, will have nothing more to do with him."

Lionel made no immediate reply to a remark which had a somewhat anxiously interrogative ring; but he presently said, "I have written to resign my directorship."

"I am glad to hear that—very glad. Although I presume that Strahan will have to send in his resignation also."

"I should doubt that. A man doesn't give up a lucrative post because he has been so unfortunate as to be arrested upon a charge which can't be substantiated—and so fortunate as to be honourably acquitted. For, in spite of what you say, it seems to me that he must be honourably acquitted, if he is to be acquitted at all. As for me, I shall accept the verdict of the jury, whatever it may be; but I intend to tell Strahan that, on other grounds, I must decline the honour of his future acquaintance. Circumstances have come to my knowledge which—in short, which have caused me to change my opinion of him and adopt yours. Let us agree that the man is a cad and never say another word about him."

St. Quintin silently acquiesced. What might be the nature of the circumstances alluded to he did not know, nor was he very curious to inquire. Conjectures of various kinds could be easily formed; but it was evident that there was no good purpose to be served by giving utterance to any of them, and during the remainder of a rather difficult and constrained evening he heroically refrained from saying many things which he was sorely tempted to say.

As for the great trial of the morrow, to which so

many thousands of newspaper readers were eagerly looking forward, it fulfilled his anticipations by completely disappointing theirs. With Brydon's suicide the case for the prosecution almost necessarily collapsed, and although evidence was admitted, relating to the missing letters, which did not precisely redound to the credit of the accused, his neck was never for one moment in jeopardy. The proceedings were brief; the judge, while allowing it to be inferred that, in his opinion, the prisoner was at least as lucky as he deserved to be, practically told the jury that they had no option but to find him not guilty, and those twelve honest citizens deliberated only for a few minutes before arriving unanimously at a foregone conclusion. It is needless to add that nothing calculated to distress either Lord or Lady Middlewood transpired.

The former, after putting his wife into the carriage which was waiting to take her to the hotel, strode towards a group of gentlemen who were warmly congratulating the liberated Strahan and shaking him by the hand. Lionel's own hands were clasped behind his back; his face expressed neither satisfaction nor the reverse, and if his abstention from saying what other people were saying was a little marked, his voice did not sound particularly unfriendly, as he asked:

"Can I speak to you for a minute?"

Strahan's friends—City men, for the most part, with whom Lionel had no acquaintance—fell back immediately, while Strahan himself, who guessed what was coming, assumed a pleasant smile, although in his heart he cursed Marietta for a fool. But what he had expected did not come.

"I suppose you cannot have heard," Lionel began, as soon as they were out of earshot, "that I have retired from your board. I thought I had better tell you that I have done so, and also that I have given instructions for all the shares that I hold in the company to be sold."

"Then, my dear fellow, I am afraid you will incur

a loss. This happens to be a particularly bad moment for selling."

"So I understand; but I wish to have no further connection with the affair, even in the capacity of a shareholder, and I must tell you at the same time that I do not wish to have any further connection with you as an acquaintance."

"I suppose," observed Strahan composedly, "that you want me to ask for an explanation."

"On the contrary, I should decline to give you one if you did ask. Form what conclusions you please; only let there be no mistake as to our being strangers henceforth."

"As we parted upon friendly terms the other day," remarked Strahan, "and as the absurd accusation which was brought against me has just ignominiously failed, I can only conclude that you are taking up this tone in consequence of something which you have heard from Lady Middlewood. Well, you owe me one, of course, and it is impossible for me to say what I might say by way of excuse; but really I can't admire your method of avenging yourself. Even if you manage to wreck the company—and I doubt whether you will—you will scarcely ruin me. Moreover, I shall be leaving England very shortly; so that your countenance and support matter nothing to me, one way or the other. It is true that you get out of the affair with a whole skin, which is some consolation to you, I suppose; still I should have thought that, being a much more powerful man than I am, you would at least have attempted to break mine. However, if you are satisfied, it is not for me to complain."

"You can't insult me," answered Lionel; "you probably know that I am not a coward, and that I am speaking the simple truth when I say that I don't consider you worth kicking. Thrashing you would entail some sort of a public explanation, and that, as I said just now, I don't care to explain. Nor have I the slightest desire to ruin either you or your company; so

far as I am concerned, you are both welcome to flourish. That is all I have to say."

Apparently, Strahan also had nothing more to say. He laughed, raised his hat with a mocking exaggeration of politeness, and turned on his heel. Perhaps he was conscious of having been morally kicked; perhaps for a few moments he realised that nothing on earth can compensate a man for having behaved, or even for having been treated like a cur; but it is more likely that he rejoiced in his regained and unchallenged liberty. He passed then and there out of the lives of those who have figured in this history, willingly enough abandoning all idea of an English career, and in the colony which owes so much to his zeal and capacity he will, it may be anticipated, reach a wealthy and honoured old age. The sensational affair which preceded his departure for Australia has not prejudiced public opinion against him either in the northern or in the southern hemisphere.

As for Lionel, he went his way with head erect, but with a heavy heart. In the lives of almost all men, and certainly of all men constituted as he chanced to be, there are sure to come moments of utter despondency —moments when it seems no longer possible to believe in anything or to trust anybody. The race to which we belong is admittedly composed of miserable sinners; we deceive ourselves, we deceive one another; sometimes existence looks like one prolonged and more or less futile deception. Yet the average gentleman must needs believe that he personally is an honourable man—must needs be shocked and amazed when he discovers that those whom he has trusted are nothing of the sort. Possibly women have a different standard; it is often asserted that they have. Or perhaps they contrive to get on comfortably enough without any standard at all, aided by such emotions as circumstances may evoke. At all events, Lionel, who was only an average gentleman, perceived that, for his peace of mind, he must make some such excuse on behalf of the woman who

bore his name. Moreover, there were other excuses—obvious enough, now that he came to think of them. If Marietta had been in fault, so had he; the best plan was to turn over a new leaf, to forgive and forget—and there is never any use in forgiving by halves. Two reflections helped to sustain and comfort him: he was convinced that his wife could not really have loved so despicable a fellow as Strahan, and he was very glad that he had resisted a strong temptation to pound that despicable fellow to a jelly. Nothing now stood in the way of complete reconciliation—nothing, that is, except the unfortunate disability under which the average gentleman labours of reconstructing fallen idols. But it may be, after all, that the worship of idols is no very sure road to domestic felicity, and that a man who has got rid of illusions is better equipped for the task which lies before him than an idiotic young lover can be.

At the hotel, where an expectant group had assembled, two lovers who flattered themselves that, whatever they might be, they were not idiots, awaited the formal approbation of the head of the family. That request, the younger of them made haste to point out, was a mere matter of form; because she could do as she pleased, and nothing would prevent her from doing what she intended to do.

"All the same, we should like to be patted on the head and be told that you are pleased with us. Granny thinks you will be disgusted with us and displeased with her; but I am bound to say that this has been none of her doing. If she had had her way——"

"If I had had my way, Betty," interrupted Lady Maria quickly, "you and your tongue would be under better control. I never made use of such a word as disgust—which would be quite inappropriate—and I hope your brother has sense enough to understand that, as I have no authority, I cannot be saddled with responsibility."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Lionel, "what funny people you are, all of you! Is it likely that I should be dis-

pleased or disgusted because my sister is going to marry the very best fellow that I know? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Well," answered Betty demurely, "we haven't known it very long ourselves. In fact, it has been a little bit of a surprise to us both."

"The last few days," remarked Lionel, "have been rather fruitful in surprises; but this at least is an altogether pleasant one."

"And the others can't be fairly called unpleasant," chimed in Lady Maria. "It is dreadful, of course, to think of that unfortunate man's having committed suicide—and done it in such a horrid way too!—still I feel sure that he has spared us all a good deal of distress and discomfort. Have you seen poor Mr. Strahan and assured him of our sympathy?"

"I have seen him," Lionel replied rather drily. "He means to sail for Australia very soon, he tells me."

Marietta drew a long breath. "I wonder whether he is guilty or innocent?" she murmured.

"A jury of his fellow-countrymen have pronounced him innocent," said St. Quintin.

"And yet he goes to Australia! Well, I trust he will stay there; for I do not wish ever to set eyes on him again. I always disliked him, and lately I have hated him!"

She threw an anxious, appealing glance at her husband, who understood what she meant, and whose hand was surreptitiously extended to clasp hers. It may be hoped that she was appreciative; it is certain that at that moment she was, for once in her life, thankful and contented.

THE END.

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